

TOUCH DOWN: THE JOY OF ADVENT

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Introduction

When the Toronto Argonauts scored a touch-down that swept them past the early successes of the BC Lions on Grey Cup Sunday, there was joy in Eastern Canada. (I won't say anything about Western Canada.)

When the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, working as a team, scored a touch-down on planet earth, behind enemy lines, God's angel proclaimed to the shepherds, "Be not afraid, for behold I bring you good news of great joy, which will come to all people."

Isaiah foresaw this and said,

*The people walking in darkness have seen a great light;(touch-down!)
On those living in the land of the shadow of death, a light has dawned.
You have enlarged the nation and increased their joy;
They rejoice before you as people rejoice at the harvest (Isaiah 9:2-3, NIV).*

The Apostle John spoke about it this way:

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. (Touch-down!) We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth...From the fullness of his grace we all have received one blessing after another (John 1:14, 16).

At once the angel was joined by a huge angelic choir singing God's praises: "Glory to God in the heavenly heights, Peace to all men and women on earth who please him (Luke 2:13-14, NIV).

And, after having seen the child, all God's people, together with the shepherds of old, return to their homes, their places of work – to their schools and neighborhoods – glorifying and praising God for all the things they have seen and heard. And joy spreads like wildfire.

"Touch-down, Touch-down" we cry. "Emmanuel – God with us – at last!" Nothing will be the same after scoring this big one! Now we know the big prize is within reach.

Christmas is such an Irrational Season

If we try to make rational sense of the incarnation we will quickly descend into skepticism and unbelief.

That is what the Gnostics of the first century did. To them the earth and our very human bodies were the epitome of evil, created by an emanation of God that had forgotten his goodness. To think that God would take on human form – that he would break out of the realm of the Spirit, where all is light - to touch the world of atoms where so much darkness reigns, was unthinkable. So, all they could admit to was that Jesus was perhaps a good man, but certainly not God. If he were God he would have known better than to set foot on planet earth.

And so today, many rational minds question the validity of the “touch-down” we are talking about. God taking on human form? It is hard enough to conceive of a God of love use of reason, let alone God setting foot on the earth in human form. To the rational mind that is an illusion, pure and simple. And illusions don’t score any points.

That is why I say Christmas is irrational. When Ruth and I were first married we lived in Portage la Prairie. One day shortly before Christmas we were shopping in a large store downtown when in walked a small group of mentally challenged people, obviously on leave from the institution on the north side of town. “Merry Christmas!” they shouted to everyone in the store. They walked throughout the store shaking hands and shouting out their merriment. Some people seemed agitated by such irrational behavior. Later I asked Ruth who was most normal, us or them?

But sometimes, even in our churchly circles, we try to squeeze the incarnation into some kind of a small box. It’s a fascinating story that interests children and makes for good program material. But it is considered a sign of maturity not to get as excited about Christmas as the children do. Why is that? Should we as adults not be leading our children in joy instead of watching them from the safety of our adult defense lines?

Or sometimes we tend to think of the incarnation in a utilitarian fashion. Well, we say, since Jesus had to die on the cross, there had to be a way of getting him there. So the incarnation – God becoming human – is simply a means to an end.

But when we wrap the incarnation up so neatly we are in danger of missing the mystery and wonder of it all. Christmas is then not much more than a messy, and somewhat awkward, necessity in order to get Christ to the cross. It is a prelude to the real thing – a warm up band to the real concert that would happen later. Just one of those details.

Now I do not wish to downplay the relevance of the cross and the significance of Easter. You have heard my heartbeat on that earlier this year. But neither do I want to downplay the incarnation, to make it simply a means to an end. It is much more than a logistical matter – a way to get Christ to the cross. If that were the case, it would have made more sense for Jesus to set foot on the earth as an adult, just a few days before his crucifixion.

Perhaps, if we could see the big picture – a bird’s eye view of God’s drama on earth - we would see the incarnation as the main event, or at least Act One of a two act drama. Not just a prelude to a program or a forward to a book. *Emmanuel, God with us*, is no small thing! Viewed from this perspective, the cross demonstrates the extent to which Jesus was willing to go to be the true Emmanuel – God with us. Having come to be with us, he was willing to come all the way – down to the deepest dregs of darkness – and there to open up a way of eternal life for us. It tells us that his identification with us as Emmanuel is all or nothing! And Jesus went all the way!

Philippians 2 seems to bear this out. First comes the statement that although he was in very nature God, Christ emptied himself, taking on the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And then verse eight says, *And, being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to death – even the death on a cross!*

In other words, there was more to taking on human form than being a means to getting onto a cross. The incarnation was an event of great significance that can better be described in song and poetry than in logical formulas. That is why the story is told best by a host of angels singing to shepherds in the field on a star-lit night. *Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rest!*

That is why I like the Christmas carol, **Joy to the World**. Many times in academic circles I have heard it said that even though we all like singing the familiar carol, its theology is flawed. But I have come to see that Isaac Watts, who wrote the lyrics to the song in 1719, may have had deeper insight than some of the 20th century theologians who criticized him.

These theologians were pious, to be sure. But to my mind also a little paternalistic. I can just hear them say, *“Let the common folk sing the song with bad theology which they love so much. Once the euphoria of Christmas is over, we will teach them the real biblical truth.”*

This morning I am siding with Isaac Watts. I think he caught a dimension of the biblical truth about the incarnation that got drowned out in the 20th century in many Christian circles. So if you are normally inclined to criticize me for being too post-modern, today you will have to criticize me for being too old fashioned. I will continue to sing **Joy to the World** and mean every word of it 1719 style.

*Joy to the World, the Lord is come;
Let earth receive her king;
Let every heart prepare him room
And heaven and nature sing.*

*Joy to the earth, the Savior reigns,
Let all their songs employ;
While fields and flocks, rocks, hills and plains,
Repeat the sounding joy.*

*No more let sin and sorrows grow,
Nor thorns infest the ground,
He comes to make his blessings flow,
Far as the curse is found.*

*He rules the world with truth and grace,
And makes the nations prove,
The glories of his righteousness,
And wonders of his love.*

So what fault did they find in this wonderful, but flawed, carol?

The first fault they found was the notion that the incarnation had something to do with creation itself. The carol calls nature to express its joy in Christ's coming. Fields and floods, rocks, hills and plains - come on - repeat the sounding joy! This is good news for you too! Like the psalmist of old called on the trees of the fields to clap their hands, Isaac Watts called on the earth itself to cry out with joy. He understood that God's "touch-down" on his own, scarred and broken world was reason enough for the earth itself to shout for joy! For the rocks to cry out!

Imagine yourself being an architect and builder. You plan and build the most beautiful palace you can imagine. But war and revolution causes you to flee your dream palace. Meanwhile vandals trash the place. Windows get broken, graffiti is scrawled on the walls, the front flower garden turns to thistles, the roof leaks and water damage peels away the plaster of inside walls. Rats and mice scurry about every room. Then after many years and with much effort it becomes possible for you to return to your palace - to repair, rebuild and take up residence again.

If the palace could talk, what would it say? "Welcome back! Oh Joy! Now, I will once again be able to be the dream palace for you I was meant to be." This is a parable about Christ coming back to his own scarred and broken world to take up residence. And the rocks cried out, "Joy to the World!"

Yes, it is true that the earth still groans and waits for its full redemption, as Paul says it in Romans. But the good news is that the architect and builder has already moved back in and has begun the reclamation project. Some of the rats still think they run the place, but you and I and the angels know that the owner has returned, and is still present through his Spirit and his people, and is hard at work to restore what was damaged.

The fact that God touched down on the earth he owned, and took up a human form that is made of dust now makes the whole world sacred. This is a great mystery, revealed only through the eyes of faith. Nothing we touch or do from here on in is secular anymore. Madeleine L'Engle agrees when she says, *There is nothing so secular that it cannot be sacred, and this is one of the deepest messages of the incarnation.*

Wendell Berry pushes out this thought further to develop a biblical theology about how to live in God's sacred world. He says, "***We have the right to use the gifts of nature but not to ruin or waste them.***"

So from my point of view, the earth has reason to repeat a sounding joy! And we all are called to sacred living as far as the earth is concerned. This message has often been missed in 20th century Christianity. In fact Christians have often been at the forefront of desecrating nature because they have not understood the nature of the incarnation.

The second supposed problem with the lyrics of **Joy to the World** is the notion that Christ's birth sets in motion a reversal of the curse this world lives with. ***He comes to make his blessings flow, far as the curse is found.***

Some have argued that the curse is not really touched until Christ dies on the cross or even perhaps until his second-coming. So to talk of a curse reversal with the first coming of Christ is premature. But is it really?

We understand that at the heart of the curse that came with the expulsion from the garden, lies the separation of God's created world, including human beings, from himself. Gone is the walk in the garden in the cool of the day. It is replaced by hiding, running, killing, lying – in short alienation, and a good deal of powerlessness to live fully and freely as we were meant to live.

The Bible speaks about a whole range of principalities and powers that seek to keep us separated from God and his good purposes for us. These powers can refer to spiritual forces. They can also refer to any thing else that God has created for our good but, when twisted out of shape or given wrong priorities, keep us from God. For the rich young ruler it was money. For the Pharisees it was tradition and power. For others it was the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes or the pride of life. For still others it was the fear of the present or the future, the fear of death or the fear of life (Ro. 8:28). What is it for you?

When Christ scored a touch-down behind these enemy lines, and began to live among us, it soon became clear that **none** of the powers that seek to separate us from God could touch him. They tried, but he lived as a fearless and free person. In speaking the truth, he exposed the powers that enslave us. In resisting the temptations in the wilderness he broke the back of the fiercest temptations common to us all.

Paul says in Colossians 2:15 that by his fearless presence in this world he "disarmed the powers and authorities" – all those things that try to keep the world and its inhabitants away from the heart of God. By his life he disarmed them. One by one Christ pried loose the planks nailed over the door of our imprisonment.

And then, for good measure, Paul says, “...*having disarmed the powers and authorities (in his life), he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.*” The cross was the final volley of the battle he had already won by being Emmanuel - God with us - in the face of all the principalities and powers.

So when Isaac Watts says in verse three of his carol that Christ’s birth is already the beginning of the reversal of the curse, he is right. In that moment the snow of a long winter began to melt, and grace began flowing like streams of water in spring. And that is reason enough to be filled with joy. So we have permission to sing heartily and without reservation, “*He comes to make his blessings flow, far as the curse is found.*”

There was more to criticize in this carol, but I have said enough to illustrate that Isaac Watts was not a dim-whit. He was more than a 20-watt light bulb. (Pardon the pun.) He ran on at least 500 watts, and his was a deeply penetrating search light.

Since my childhood, when I heard it for the first time, I always thought that the words of the negro spiritual, *Were you There*, were somewhat irrational. “*Were you there when they crucified my Lord?*” Of course not, I thought to myself. I am living twenty centuries later. I often wondered about what kind of a time machine I would need to actually be there when it happened.

It is only recently that I have come to understand more fully what I think a poor negro slave, probably a woman, understood intuitively when she first sang those words, *Were You there?* (She probably didn’t even write them down because in those days it was a crime for a black person to know how to read and write.) In our modern world we are slaves to time made up of minutes, hours, days and years. Such understanding of time comes from the Greek word “*chronos*,” from which we get our word chronology – one event following another.

Without going into a technical word study, I want to alert you to the fact that when our English Bibles use the word “time” it is usually a translation of the Greek work “*kairos*,” not “*chronos*.” (All the references to time listed in the concordance of my Bible are translations of the word Kairos. It is too bad that our English language can not differentiate between the two.) Kairos is not chronos. It is God’s time and it has nothing to do with hours, days and years. It is understood not in terms of one event following another, but more in terms of quality and readiness. It is the kind of time we will know in heaven. Kairos time is the eternal present of God. You might say that heaven is the victory of kairos over chronos.

If we can wrap our minds around kairos, what appears to be irrational to the modern mind, can become a sacred thing. To sing, were you there, does not ask you to get into a time machine, but invites you to be in tune with God and his eternal present.

Enough of that. It's all Greek to me! But given what we know about kairos time, I am waiting for someone to write a song entitled, "***Where You There for the Touch Down?***" The words of that song would invite us to the kind of life that can only be lived when we are fully aware of the Christmas message – Emmanuel - God with us. And it would be a song of joy!

In Conclusion, I would like to tell you a true story as told by Jean Vanier, founder of L'Arche communities of the disabled around the world. I found it in his little booklet entitled, "From Brokenness to Community."

One of the L'Arche communities had welcomed an eight-year-old boy, Armando. Armando could not walk or talk and was very small for his age. He came from an orphanage where his mother had abandoned him. Armando was desperately thin and was dying for lack of food. He had lost all desire to live, let alone eat. After a while in this community where he was surrounded by people who loved him and wanted him to live, he gradually began to eat again. And his body, which had been a tight knot, began to relax. When you picked him up his whole body would quiver with joy and excitement and say: "I love you." People always wanted to hold him because they said it was therapeutic for them.

One day a bishop visited the community and they asked him if he wanted to hold Armando. He did. Armando settled into the bishop's arms, his whole body quivering and his little eyes shining brightly through his broad smile. After half an hour they asked the bishop whether they should take Armando from him. "No, no," he replied.

Vanier writes about this moment as follows: "I could see that Armando in all his littleness, but with all the power of love in his heart, was touching and changing the heart of that bishop. Bishops are busy men, they have power and they frequently suffer acts of aggression, so they have to create solid defense mechanisms. But someone like Armando can penetrate the barriers they – and all of us – create around our hearts. Armando can awaken us to love and call forth the well of living waters and of tenderness hidden inside of us."

Let this true story be a parable of the incarnation – the great touch-down. Abandoned and broken, this world was at the mercy of all the principalities and powers that twisted it out of shape. Then God came to embrace us with his love. And by that love we are transformed. We are still weak, small and unable to walk on our own. But all who touch us or hold us will experience a transforming quiver of love and desire to be healed, as was the bishop.

Now, let us stand and sing with gusto, and without reservation, **Joy to the World.**

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