

# “Nothing But a Child”

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Isaiah 9: 1-7

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Have you ever noticed how special days, like Christmas, are more connected to other Christmases than they are to the day or the week before? What I mean is that if I were to mention December 8th to you, unless that is your birthday or has some other special significance to you, you probably wouldn't instantly think of other December 8th's. You probably can't remember who you were with and what you did on December 8th 2015, unless it is a special day for you. Random days are not connected to the past or to the future the way that a special day like Christmas is.

That was one of the brilliant parts about the story *A Christmas Carol*. Remember how Scrooge is visited by the ghosts of Christmas past, present and future?



Through these visits Scrooge is brought back to how Christmas used to be when he was young. He is also brought into a fuller understanding of the present Christmas and into a possible tragic Christmas of the future if things don't change. The

ghosts of Christmas past, present and future were sent to help Scrooge change and heal and to help him discover the true spirit of Christmas through the joy of generosity and sharing and love.

We too can be haunted by the ghosts of Christmas past, present and future. But because it doesn't happen for us in the dramatic, chain-rattling style that Scrooge experienced it, we don't notice it or learn from it. But we can be oppressed by it. Dwelling on Christmases of the past, or expectations for today's Christmas or fears about tomorrow's Christmas can prevent us from experiencing the true meaning and spirit of Christmas.

Because Christmas is connected in our minds and hearts to other Christmases, we can't help but think of other Christmases we've had, and it's not always helpful. Perhaps you are reminded of how good Christmas used to be when you were young. Or of what it was like when that special person was still alive, the family was still together and getting along, or when you had more money coming in and could afford more. Or maybe

past Christmases bring up memories of a dysfunctional family and a series of dysfunctional Christmases.

The ghost of Christmas present keeps us running around trying to live up to everyone's expectations and get everything done on time. We are pressured to spend too much money, thinking that others will be happier and Christmas will be better if we do. The whole commercialism of Christmas annoys us — and yet we just get sucked into the vortex of it.

And then there is the ghost of Christmas future. Baseball Hall of Fame catcher, Lawrence "Yogi" Berra, once remarked, "*The future ain't what it used to be.*" Especially if this Christmas is not like it used to be, or if Christmas reminds you of the dysfunctions or difficulties in your family or of loved ones who are gone. Often leading up to Christmas there is great stress and fear of how bad and lonely and depressing this one *might* be. Often with grief people have a harder time in the days leading up to the anniversary of the loss of a loved one than they do on the anniversary itself. They dread the day coming, but the actual day doesn't tend to be as bad. That's how Christmas can be for many: the days leading up can be worse than the actual day.

I love the scripture that we read earlier from Isaiah 9. It is so profound and such a reminder of what this time of the year is really about.

It begins: *But those who have suffered will no longer be in pain. The territories of Zebulun and Naphtali in Galilee were once hated. But this land of the Gentiles across the Jordan River and along the Mediterranean Sea will be greatly respected.*

Only a few years before, the Assyrian army had ravaged and conquered the territories of Zebulun and Naphtali. We think we have troubles! This was a group of people who knew the horrors of war, who had experienced drought and famine. Apart from family, there was no social safety net. I think of what many of our refugee families have experienced and the peace they now experience in Canada.

*Those who walked in the dark have seen a bright light. And it shines upon everyone who lives in the land of darkest shadows. ... You have broken the power of those who abused and enslaved our people. You have rescued them just as you saved your people from Midian.*

And what was the source of the light according to the prophet Isaiah? *For unto us a child is born.* How could a baby possibly make a difference?

There's a very old American short story titled "The Luck of Roaring Camp", written by Bret Harte. It became quite famous in its day back at the end of the 1800's. Roaring Camp was supposedly the roughest mining camp in the West. It was notorious for its murderous fights, general

lawlessness, and drunkenness. The miners of Roaring Creek were a tough bunch.



For a little while there was a woman there, a Native American Cherokee named Sal. She dies in childbirth, but the baby survives and is quite healthy. The miners, however, were faced with quite a dilemma. What were they going to do with a baby? They made a crib out of an old box lined with dirty rags. But they decided the box was not good enough or clean enough to hold a baby. A cradle was purchased from a town 80 miles away, and they placed the baby in it. Beautiful blankets were brought in from Sacramento and placed in the cradle. The miners noticed that the shack where the baby was kept was filthy, so they washed the floor, walls, and

ceiling. Nice curtains were installed on the windows. Life began to change in Roaring Creek, and the brutality ceased.

Every day the baby was taken to the entrance of the mine so that all the miners could watch the baby's growth. The miners decided the entrance to the mine was ugly, so they planted a beautiful garden there. These hardened men loved to touch and hold and play with the baby, but their hands were dirty. Soon the general store sold out of soap! Life in Roaring Camp had completely changed because of a baby. These hardened miners gave up their nasty, profane ways -- all for the love of a baby!

Christmas is about a profound hope that the son of God has come into the world, and because of that, everything changes. If you haven't experienced that change in your life, open your heart and invite Jesus to come into it. Your life will change with Jesus in it! You'll find you want to clean yourself up and make the world a more beautiful place for the sake of the wonderful love that lives in you. Are you haunted at Christmas by regrets of what *used* to be, or by stresses about what *should* be, or fears about what *might* be? Then it's time to take a trip to the manger and pick up and hold the baby.

There's a Christmas song that I love called "Nothing but a Child" written by Steve Earl. The chorus goes like this:

*Nothing but a child could wash these tears away  
Or guide a weary world into the light of day  
And nothing but a child could help erase these miles  
So once again we all can be children for awhile.*

It makes no sense that a baby could make such a difference ... and yet in the same way that the tiniest amount of light in a dark place scatters the gloom and darkness, there is no question that small things and small actions make a difference.

In my devotion yesterday there was a little verse in the book of Zechariah that said "*Who dares despise the day of small things?*" (Zech 4:10) They had begun to return to Jerusalem after the exile and Zechariah was given a vision about the rebuilding of the temple. The grief was great when they returned to Judah. The city was devastated – there were no walls around the city so they were vulnerable, and there was no temple. The thing they most yearned for —returning home — was more than bitter sweet. They had returned, but it was not what they had left. The grief would have been enormous. But Zerubbabel had laid the foundation. It wasn't much at all, but it starts small. "*The hands of Zerubbabel have laid the foundation of this temple; his hands will also complete it. Then you will know that the Lord Almighty has sent me to you. Who dares despise the day of small things?*" (Zech 4:9-10)

Jesus often described the Kingdom of God as something small, like a mustard seed. And of course, that's how he arrived: tiny, fragile in obscurity, in poverty. And he continued to live and teach with no real fame or name, and he died like a common criminal. And yet the effects of his life and death are still with us today.

If you are regretting or worried or just generally not in a good space this Christmas, look for a small thing to make a difference. It might be a small thing that you do to make a difference for someone else. I think that is so often the key – instead of waiting for things to change for you – you make a small difference for someone else and see how it makes a difference to others.

But remember that even though our celebration of Christmas is far from perfect...perhaps far from what it should be, you can still find the Christ child in it. *Those who walked in darkness have seen a great light.* Jesus is present in the darkness, and there is no place where he is not there. He will be with you in your darkness and will give you a peace that passes understanding.

This season, pick up the child and bring him into your heart. Then the strangest thing will happen: you'll not only have him inside, you will see signs of him everywhere you go.

*At this point the congregation was invited to light a candle and place it in a box of sand. All were invited to light the candle as a prayer for ourselves for healing and for light in the places that are hurting, and as a prayer for someone else or a difficult situation in the world. May the peace of Christ be with you now and always.*



(picture inside Sanctuary after candle lighting)