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Abstract

"... only God could provide life in the middle of winter. But he does it in such a gentle, quiet way... "

Posting about the essence of the Christmas season from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

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Finding Hope in a Bleak Midwinter

Bruce Kuiper

December 29, 2022

Every Christmas I get stuck on a different song that seems to represent some essence of the season. “O Holy Night” got me through my first Christmas away from home, “Breath of Heaven” became significant during my first Christmas as a father, “Peace on Earth” helped us get through a tough holiday season a few years back, and “Walking in a Winter Wonderland” always reminds me of snowy romantic walks I’ve had with my wife. Last year it was “Little Drummer Boy” for some reason, maybe because the concept of “sacrifice” has been more of a theme in my life in recent years, or because there was a great new rendition floating around. Who knows? I just like it a lot.

This year, against my better judgement, it’s been “In the Bleak Midwinter.” The reluctance comes from how it’s not really an easy song to sing, and it’s not especially a cheery song in this Season of Joy. That whole first verse especially illustrates the bleakness, with frosty winds, iron earth, frozen water, and lots and lots of snow. The last verse is probably the most familiar, what with the question of “What can I give him?” and its comparisons to shepherds and wise men.

With this similar sacrificial ending concept, it’s a quiet song, where amid the bleakness we have a simple quiet kiss, a lowly stable, and a poor servant—no crackling fireplaces, no fun sleigh rides, no jolly gift givers, no choirs, no monumental event. Even in other serene songs like “Little Town of Bethlehem” or “Away in a Manger,” the stars mark the occasion; not so here. Angels *may* have been present, but all we can really see for certain is a young woman cradling her child.

This contrast becomes the song’s focus. Here we have the Creator of the universe, someone so vast and beyond comprehension that “heaven cannot hold him” but whose new residence is a stable ... and I’m guessing that the stable itself is hardly enough of a refuge against the harsh winter, let alone sufficient to house the earth’s true Lord. We all know this mystery, of course, and many other songs allude to the Infinite wrapped up in the form of a baby. But that allusion often ends with the cuteness of the Christ child, and fails to make clear that this situation is without parallel in all of history.

I like this unique symbolism quite a bit, but I also like the stress on how it takes place in winter. The cold setting so clearly outline in the first verse makes the frailty of the child that much more apparent. Here we have the Almighty God incarnate in a helpless baby, and in the middle of a cruel winter at that.

Now, I know that a lot of scholarship has suggested that Christ was actually born in the summer, or at least in a warmer month. And others might add that while it can get a bit chilly in winter in Israel, the winter landscapes that we have in northern Europe or the upper part of North America most likely would not be as ... well, "bleak" in Israel.

I'm okay with that, though. This picture of an uninviting environment helps underscore us and our attitudes, doesn't it? Often our hearts as individuals and as the human race are as cold as a Minnesota winter, rock-hard, frozen solid, chilled to the core. To break through such coldness would require a monumental effort, an effort beyond human ability. In other words, only God could provide life in the middle of winter. But he does it in such a gentle, quiet way that melts our hearts rather than chopping them out of the ice. Once these hearts are free of winter, they end up being the only things we can offer in return. And, really, they're the only things we have that have any true value.

It's winter now, and it will be for many more weeks, so it's difficult to see the hope of spring or the joy of life. Such a situation—such a bleak midwinter setting—can help us see the love and majesty of our God who not only provides life in the ice, but who also wants to so much that he provides ultimate Life for our frozen hearts. In the light of such monumental love, the song asks the beautiful question: "What can we give Him, poor as we are?" In this bleak time of year, may we know, feel, and give the same answer as the song, doing so in full awareness of how even our all, our core being, our heart, pales in comparison to what we were first given.