

## The Arrival Christmas Eve 2010

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Not long ago I walked into a room to find Karen listening to the radio and smiling. I thought she must have found something funny on NPR and so I asked what she had heard that had amused her. She answered my question with a question of her own. "What would you think you were going to hear if the announcer on the radio said, "next on NPR, the humble one, sent peace." "Some kind of Christmas meditation about Christ providing peace for the world." I replied. "Exactly" Karen confirmed. "That's what I thought I was going to hear when the man on the radio said, 'coming up, the humble one, sent peace.' But you know what the report was about?" "No," I truthfully replied. "The penny." Karen said with a wide grin.

Turns out the reporter didn't really say, "the humble one, sent peace." He said, "the humble one-cent piece." The words sound the same, but they convey a totally different meaning. The significance of any event is deeply affected by one's perspective.

Now, I realize that there is an objective importance to many events. Whether or not an occurrence is meaningful to most people, it can still have a huge impact on history. About a week ago, a spacecraft was launched from a pad in Kazakhstan that carried a three person crew to the International Space Station. The crew consisted of a Russian commander and two flight engineers, one American and one Italian. The American is Cady Coleman who is making her third flight in space. All contact was unexpectedly lost with the spacecraft for several hours on Thursday. In fact, the crew could not assure mission control of their safety until they docked at the International Space Station on Friday morning.

Now maybe you knew all that. But maybe you didn't. There was a time when such a flight would have dominated all news media. We would have been collectively holding our breath over the fate of the crew, we would have applauded when they landed safely, we would have welcomed Ms. Coleman as a national heroine when she returned. Tom Hanks would have made a movie about it. Now days, the benching of Donovan McNabb, the trading of Gilbert Arenas and the dismissal of Ralph Friedgen use up all the ink. The objective truth, however, is that the work done in the fields of chemistry, biology, medicine and physics going on at the International Space Station will very possibly change our world, while the passing careers of sports celebrities will fade into footnotes.

So granted there is an objective significance to events that is separate from their personal impact on our awareness. But the influence an event has on our lives is shaped for a very long time by our personal perspective.

At the beginning of this Christmas season, I was shopping for t-shirts at a department store in an upscale mall in King of Prussia, Pennsylvania. While I was looking for my size, I noticed that the mall sound system was playing a catchy version of God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen. It was the first time I had paid attention to a carol this holiday season and I found myself cheerfully humming along. My revelry was dampened however when I heard two clerks talking rather loudly as they unpacked a carton of dress shirts a few feet from where I was shopping. A young man said to his female co-worker, "I hate Christmas music." "Why?" she inquired. "Because it forces everyone to act like their so happy. I'm not jolly and I'm not going to fake like I am by singing some stupid Christmas song." The objective event of Christ's birth was not changed by the young man's perspective, but the current influence on his life was radically diminished by his darkened view of all things Christmas.

Luke reports in his gospel, that people in different layers of society had widely divergent views of Christ's birth. As far as we know, the Roman Emperor Caesar Augustus wasn't even aware that the birth of Jesus had taken place. Neither was the Syrian governor Quirinius. The night of Christ's birth was like every other night to these rulers. They did whatever potatoes do and drifted off to sleep completely oblivious to the fact that God had acted to change the world forever.

Although I can't prove my theory is true, I imagine that Joseph was so overwhelmed by the responsibilities involved with getting his pregnant wife settled in a town whose lodging facilities were hopelessly over booked, that he was too distracted to fully comprehend the meaning of the event unfolding in that manger in Bethlehem. My opinion of Joseph's frame of mind is based on my own experience. When I'm traveling with my family, I'm often so focused on getting us to our destination, securing the room, paying the bill, lugging the suitcases around and getting everyone settled in, that I don't start my vacation until about the third day of an excursion. Joseph knew he was overseeing an exceptional birth, but he must have been fairly consumed with taking care of all the details of the trip, lodging and safety.

The Shepherds were drawn into the world-altering event by the proclamation of angels. Otherwise they would not have had a clue that they were working in the vicinity of the Savior of the world. Were it not for the angelic celebration, their minds would have been on tending their sheep and the night would have passed without distinction. When the angels lit up the sky, however, the shepherds were surprised with a sense of wonder over a birth that promised peace on earth.

The angels no doubt had seen this day coming for centuries. God promised the birth of Jesus would take place millennia before Christ's infant voice broke the silent night, so the angels must have been marking days off their celestial calendars for eons. The angelic choir must have rehearsed for thousands of years and had been eagerly awaiting their chance to deliver their glad tidings. Jesus birth did not come to them in the midst of distractions or as a surprise on an otherwise routine work shift, his birth arrived as the culmination of years of anticipation. I think the reason they made so much noise on the first Christmas Eve is because they had been storing up the jubilation for generations. When it was released, it must have shaken the plains of Bethlehem.

Matthew tells us that King Herod viewed the birth as a threat to his job security and power. The same gospel teaches that the Magi saw Christ's birth as having cosmic significance.

So whose perspective do you share this Christmas Eve? Like Caesar and Quirinius are you rather oblivious to the meaning of Christmas? Or do you identify with Joseph, so busy with all the details of preparation that you hear the news amidst frantic distraction? Does the night come to you like it appeared to the shepherds, an astonishing wonder that lights up your otherwise routine life? Or do you view it like the angels, a night you have been anticipating for a long, long time. Possibly Christmas threatens you in some way like old King Herod or maybe you view it as an event that not only alters world history but in fact brings the entire cosmos to experience great joy.

Let's see, Caesar, Quirinius, Joseph, the Shepherds, the angels, Herod, the magi, whose perspective have we missed? Oh yes, Mary, the mother of Jesus.

I heard from my mother at the beginning of this Christmas season. She sent me a Christmas card with two unusual enclosures. One is this clipping from the Salina Journal, my hometown newspaper. The clipping was separated from the date of the paper so I don't know exactly when the reported event took place. It's a picture of Satchel Page giving a baseball clinic in my hometown after his career had ended. There are a bunch of boys watching Satchel model the proper way to pitch. My mom says I'm in the picture but here's the thing, I don't remember the event and I can't even tell which boy is me. I'm not sure I would have even known who Satchel Page was when I was a boy. Maybe I didn't know the significance of who I was seeing, but my mother knew, so she treasured this keepsake and remembered it for me.

The other enclosure is my grade card from my final semester in high school. If you had asked me before this Christmas greeting arrived how I did in high school, I would have said, "Great. Straight A student. A model scholar." But the Salina Secondary School record begs to differ. I got an A in Symphonic Band and an A in Music Theory. But I received a B in Psychology and B in College Math. Wait it gets worse. I earned a C in chemistry and a C in Constitution. I don't even remember what Constitution was about, but that's not the most embarrassing part. There is a section on this deplorable card that contains comments from my teachers. The psychology teacher recorded that I was capable of better work and that I wasted time. Okay, maybe I did. That constitution teacher however, the class I got a C in, wrote, "working to ability." In other words, he said a C was about as good as I could do.

I remembered myself as a stellar student, but my mamma knew the truth. I was mostly mediocre and my mother treasured the keepsake and remembered that for me.

Among all the characters of the Christmas story, whose perspective is the closest to the truth? Probably Jesus' mother. It strikes me as significant that only Mary could have known all the details surrounding Jesus' birth as recorded by St. Luke. She must have told them to Luke no more than twenty-five years after Jesus' death and resurrection. Less time than what separates my mother from the events of my boyhood. If **my** mother can remember that I attended a baseball clinic with Satchel Page when she didn't even care about baseball, and if she kept the record that I got a C in constitution while "working up to my ability" when it would have suited her pride as a mother to bury that information forever, then we can be sure that Mary got it right when she reflected back on the events of Jesus birth that she had pondered deep in her soul.

It really doesn't matter what Caesar or Quirinnius thought about the birth of Jesus. Herod's opinion is rather insignificant and Joseph, the shepherds, and the wisemen don't have the viewpoint of the one who was paying attention to every moment of Jesus' birth and treasuring every detail in her heart. It's Mary's perspective that is the truest and here is what she said about the birth of Jesus, "My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior."

It's Christmas Eve and there are many ways to look at this wondrous event. Let's join with Mary and magnify the Lord and rejoice in God our Savior."