

A
Not-So-Silent
Night

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.....
THE UNHEARD STORY OF
CHRISTMAS
AND WHY IT MATTERS
.....

VERLYN VERBRUGGE



A Not-So-Silent Night: The Unheard Story of Christmas and Why It Matters

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*To Lori
The love of my life*

Contents

Acknowledgments	9
Introduction	11
1. Born to Die	15
2. The Beginning of War	21
3. O Little Town of Bethlehem	29
4. Mary's Shame	35
5. Mary's Song—and Zechariah's	45
6. The <i>Katalyma</i>	53
7. The Humiliation of Jesus' Birth	59
8. The Angels on the Field of Bethlehem	67
9. The Song of the Angels	75
10. The Words of Simeon	81
11. The Visit of the Magi	89
Conclusion	95
Notes	99

Acknowledgments

I had been thinking about writing this book for many years. Two things happened in 2008 that made it clear to me that this was the year I was supposed to do so. In the summer of 2008, our family was preparing to go to Trinidad, where I was going to teach a one-week class in 1 Corinthians, but those plans suddenly fell through. And that fall I was going to teach a course in some of Paul's letters to a local Christian college, but that opportunity fell through as well. So with extra time on my hands, I felt the Lord was telling me, "I have orchestrated these things to give you the time to put down in writing your thoughts about the dark side of Christmas."

I am indeed grateful to the Lord for the privilege I have had to spend my life studying and learning about his holy Word—as a seminary student, as a full-time pastor, and as an academic editor at one of the major evangelical Christian publishing companies. Moreover, I am indebted to him for giving me a good mind to delve into the riches of the Scriptures.

I'm appreciative, too, for the many people who have heard me talk about the themes of this book. I began preaching about the dark side of Christmas when I was pastor at the Southern Heights Christian Reformed Church in Kalamazoo, and I have continued such messages with those who attend the weekly services I lead at the Woodland Drive-In Church in Grand Rapids. Their appreciation for this theme of Christmas has meant much to me. And I thank the many others with whom I have shared these ideas and who have become enthusiastic to hear more. Their reception has encouraged me to write this book.

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Finally, I want to thank my wife, Lori, to whom this book is dedicated, for her support while this book was being written. She read through the entire manuscript and offered many fine suggestions on how to improve it. For that I am deeply appreciative.

Introduction

A lot of cultural mythology is associated with how we perceive Christmas and with how we celebrate the traditions of the Christmas season:

- It's a time for joy and happiness and the singing of cheery Christmas carols.
- It's a time for family get-togethers and feasting on all sorts of special goodies.
- It's a time for the giving and receiving of gifts. And who doesn't like to get gifts? Giving has, in fact, become so central to Christmas, we even have expressions connected with that part of our tradition. A poor family whose children do not receive gifts because they can't afford them and don't receive them through some community program "don't have a Christmas." As another expression—a local chain store advertises that because their prices are lower, you can "buy so much more Christmas."

- It's a time for brightly colored lights and decorated trees.
- It's a time for special church services with Advent candles and sometimes even a live nativity scene.
- Above all, it's a time for peace—peace that we define primarily as the absence of conflict.

For a brief time each year we get to forget about the world of war and battle; the world of Iraq, Afghanistan, and the Middle East; the world of Al Qaida and the threat of global terrorism. I suspect that almost every preacher has told the story of Christmas 1914 on the Western Front of World War I, which has reached legendary status.¹ The opposing German and British soldiers spontaneously called a cease fire and spent the day fraternizing in No Man's Land between their two military lines, singing Christmas carols, and even playing a soccer match (which reportedly ended when the soccer ball hit a barbed wire fence and deflated). The following day they were once again attempting to kill each other with machine guns. Subsequent wars have also seen declarations of a temporary ceasefire on Christmas day. It just seems right for that day.

Is this not as it should be? Isn't Christmas the one day of the year when we should least think about military issues and battle-field imagery? And isn't it the time for "peace on earth," if only symbolically?

In all our Christmas traditions we think we're correctly reflecting the teachings of the Bible on the first Christmas. After all, Christmas is about a young woman visited by an angel to tell her that she would be the mother of the Messiah, the Son of David. The story continues with the birth of a cute, cuddly baby, Jesus, lying in a manger in soft, sweet hay and surrounded by lowing cattle. Then there's that choir of angels singing the first joyous Christmas carol to some shepherds on the fields of Bethlehem: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men." And

this was followed up by three wise kings from the Orient, who came to the manger with camels laden with presents for that baby in order to celebrate his joyous birth.

If that's what we read in the Scriptures, we have a lot to learn. Matthew 1 and 2 and Luke 1 and 2, read in the context of the rest of the Scriptures and in light of the culture of that day, tell a different story. The difference between that first Christmas and our contemporary view of Christmas as reflected in our celebrations is, in fact, the difference between day and night, between light and darkness.

There is a dark side to Christmas in the Bible, though we usually choose to ignore it. There is a profound sadness that permeates the various episodes in the Christmas story, and it's important for us to see that sadness. Furthermore, Christmas, rather than being the beginning of the age of peace, was in reality the beginning of war.

This book is about that dark side of Christmas. I don't deny that the end result of the Christmas story, seen in the light of the cross and resurrection, is the triumph of victory and life and light and peace. But for the characters in the Christmas story itself, especially Joseph and Mary, an aura of profound heaviness pervades the above-mentioned four chapters of the Bible. I maintain, in fact, that until we see the dark side of Christmas, until we shed tears with Mary and Joseph, until we experience the fear held by the principal players in the Christmas story that war was on the horizon, we will never truly understand the awesomeness of what happened in that little town of Bethlehem.

Perhaps we can compare Christmas to the story of Good Friday. Why do we call the Friday of the crucifixion, which we observe each spring, "Good Friday"? Why do we call that day a day of hope? Why do we think of light when that day in history encompassed three hours of pitch-black darkness? For our Savior himself, Good

Friday was anything but good. It was a day of incredible pain and suffering. It was the hour “when darkness reigns” (Luke 22:53). The only reason we call it “Good Friday” is because it was good *for us*, not because it was good for our Lord Jesus Christ.

So, too, with Christmas. While we can now look back at that day with hope and joy and peace, for the main characters within those familiar stories it was a time of sorrow and pain and rejection and danger. A careful reading of the Scriptures in the context of what we know about the politics and culture of the day will confirm that for us.

Let me share with you a story. One of my first opportunities when I began working as an editor at Zondervan was to write some of the devotions for what eventually was called *The Daylight Devotional Bible*. This was a Bible that had 365 devotions scattered throughout the entire Bible. My task was mostly to write devotions for special days, such as Advent, Valentine’s Day, Lent, Good Friday, Easter, Mother’s Day, Memorial Day, Thanksgiving Day, and the like. In one of my devotions for Advent, I wrote something about the heaviness and darkness that pervades the traditional Christmas stories in the New Testament. The person who was editing my devotions came to me and said, “We can’t put that in our Bible. That’s not what people are looking for at Christmas time. Christmas is a time for joy and peace and love.” And so I rewrote the devotion.

That book, perhaps, was not the best time to make a point. But now it is time to pay close attention, not to our Christmas mythology, but to the Christmas stories in the Bible. There is such sadness in these episodes. But through our tears and our fears as we reflect on these stories, I pray that we may begin to hear what the Bible really tells us about the first Christmas. Let’s begin our examination of this not-so-silent night.

.....
CHAPTER 1

Born to Die

The birth of a baby is an exciting event, or at least it should be. Many, if not most, mothers-to-be are delighted at the prospect of giving birth. They may have apprehensions about the labor and delivery, but for the most part they are eagerly looking forward to the big day. Those who want to become pregnant but are unable to often carry a heavy burden in their hearts.

Naturally, during the time of pregnancy, the mother’s heart is filled with many concerns and questions. Will the pregnancy go smoothly? Will any problems develop as the child within her grows and comes to full term? How will the labor and delivery proceed? Will the baby be normal? Will there be any birth defects—either defects that are already developing in the womb or that come as a result of a difficult delivery?

To a large extent, some of these questions can be, at least partially, answered today. With the development of ultrasound technology, a living child can be detected in the womb as early as four or five weeks. As the fetus develops, its features can be