

THE FUGITIVE

From time to time, we need to take a journey into the dark side of Christmas. The reason is simple: If we do not know the darkness, we do not understand the light. If we do not know the dark side, we do not truly appreciate Christmas. Many people in our society have a tendency to want Jesus for our Savior, without admitting that we need saving. Or they think that maybe on some technicality we *do* need saving, but, since it's all automatic anyway, why pay attention to it?

The harsh side of Christmas is that it takes a lot more preparation than we want to admit is necessary. Receiving this Messiah/King requires more changes than we think we ought to have to make. For all our familiarity with carols and prophecies – with the pageantry and customs of a modern-day Christmas – nothing can obliterate the fact that Jesus was a surprise package. God threw us a curve. Jesus came through the back door of the world, to be a Messiah unlike anything the world expected – or wanted.

Upon arrival, Jesus was categorized by most people as a weirdo, a rebel, or a criminal. That turned out to be a serious blunder on the world's part, but the reality is nonetheless clear: Jesus was resisted, rejected, and exterminated. Those are the facts, however much we have tried to make up for it or make it over in the years since. And no matter how many lights we hang in December, the drama of Jesus' reception in our world remains essentially the same. This is not a Christian world. And even those of us unashamed to carry His name are constantly aware that the difference between His WAY and our ways is still very great indeed. Advent is a tall order for us earthlings. Jesus is always far more than we bargained for!

To help myself focus, I sometimes look for some appropriate theme or storyline in literature. Even when we can hide from the truth in our facts, it has a way of coming out in imagery and story. Why do you think fantasy survives in our culture? My own favorite for the Incarnation is the theme of the Prince in Disguise, but I'm saving that for another time.

A few years back, a program called *The Fugitive* was one of television's most popular shows. That story gripped the hearts and spoke to the loneliness of people all over the nation. A doctor is wrongly convicted and sentenced to death for the murder of his wife. His pleasant and

fruitful life is suddenly interrupted with tragedy and horror. As if the murder of his wife weren't tragedy enough, he himself is blamed for it. By a fluke accident, he escapes, and he wanders the earth as a fugitive. His only hope is to find the actual murderer – and sufficient proof of his own innocence – before he himself is recaptured. He keeps getting involved, helping people, caring about people. But each time he does, it brings him closer to being caught. Never can he let himself be known, fall in love, or put down roots.

The Fugitive touched people beyond anyone's expectation. People identified. People loved those who helped him and hated those who hindered or threatened him. If he had walked out of the television screen, few people would have refused to harbor and protect this man who was wanted for murder by all the laws and rules of our society.

It's nice to watch television because there we can be noble without taking any real risk of being put to the test. But in our hearts and minds, that program turned us all into criminals – willing to aid and abet this criminal – because we did not believe he was a criminal.

Hollywood always changes the stories some, from which comes the phrase "The book was even better." The Book is better this time too – the New Testament. Only, the story it tells of The Real Fugitive is true. And again there is human error: The Special Messenger – the Son of God – is wrongly convicted and sentenced to death for blasphemy. His mission of healing and love and redemption is tragically interrupted. As if the world's mockery of God were not enough, He Himself is blamed for it.

Jesus wanders the earth without home or family – constantly in danger for His life, doing good for the people He meets, but never able to stay in one place for very long, fall in love, raise a family, put down roots. Ultimately, He is caught and executed.

At the time The Book was written, Jesus – The Real Fugitive – was still an official outcast and outlaw in the eyes of the world. The Book was written in the hope of convincing people that they should go against society and take The Real Fugitive in – into their hearts, their homes, their lives. The New Testament is an appeal for us to trust and harbor this Fugitive, whose only home on earth is in the hearts of His people. This Book is about real life. And harboring The Real Fugitive puts us to the test – sooner or later, one way or another. That is why many people shy away from The Book, and prefer to stay with television stories.

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Advent is a time when people decide how much they want to know and become involved with The Real Fugitive. Some of the noise and celebration are intended to distract us from the real story. But the story is so true and powerful that every year more people get caught by it, and get caught up into it.

“The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” With such poetic beauty the event has been described – the coming of God’s Son, as a fugitive, into our world. *“And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him ... in a manger because there was no room”* Clearly He was an outcast, and hidden away.

And this child would one day discover, or remember (which way it was for Him, we do not know), that He had been sent from another realm to be something in our realm that, without Him, we could never know.

So full of hope and meaning, so beautiful in the revealed possibilities, so full of truth and love has Advent become, from our perspective, that we forget how it must have been from the other side. Without meaning to, the outward celebration hides it. Behind the scenes, where Christ still comes to us individually – person-to-person – He still comes as outcast and outlaw and fugitive. He asks if we will take Him in, harbor Him, side with Him. And the price is always fiercely and frighteningly high. To harbor this fugitive is to go against the world. That is always our experience – sooner or later, in one way or another.

Sometimes I wonder if we try to make Christmas so joyful and comforting and beautiful as a way to try to quiet our shaking knees and trembling hands. If we sing loud enough, maybe we won’t have to hear what the songs are saying: God coming to call us out of this world and into a different Kingdom. At times it almost seems like we conspire together to make it through Christmas without noticing the phenomenal tension it reveals between our world and God. You would almost think, from our celebrations, that the whole world is *happy* about His coming – like He is being welcomed with open arms and rejoicing hearts; like we are actually ready for a Prince of Peace, a Leader of Love, and a Lord who will change our ways to match eternal values. Nobody will get cheated this Christmas? Nobody will get lied to? Nobody will get wrongfully laid? Nobody will get drunk? Nobody will get abused, or ignored, or written off? Merry Christmas indeed. The thing that moves us to tears when we stop to ponder or truly hear the carols we sing is not that light comes to a place of light; it is that light comes to darkness. (*“The people who walked*

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in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined." (Isaiah 9:2))

Yes, we really do want a better world ... sort of. And no, we really are not prepared for what that means. There is terrible tension and turmoil built into the very meaning of Advent. ONE is coming who is more than we bargained for!

Oh, do not think that I say such things to dampen Christmas spirit. Christmas is far more, not less, than we make of it. But we really cannot fathom the enormity of Advent unless we ponder the full significance of what was and is going on. We can even get so locked into our own rejoicing that we forget the other side of the drama. If we rejoice, naturally we assume that everyone everywhere should be rejoicing. To be sure, Christmas in its total context is the greatest thing the earth can imagine or contain – at least for humans. Have you ever thought about what it must have seemed like from Heaven's side?

I don't know how you picture Heaven, but however you do, surely you would not feel like celebrating being told that you had to leave. No analogy will suffice, but have you ever wondered what emotions went through the mind of Christ on the day He was called into His Father's presence and asked if He would take an assignment to earth? Mission Impossible! Suicide Mission! Yet nothing less had any chance of ultimate success.

To be stripped of eternity, its freedom, its love, its beauty and joy. To take on suffering. To be closed-up in the dim awareness of human faculties. To live in heat and cold and hunger. To feel men's hatred, and know their despair. To be caught in the tides of their passions and the rush of goals that Heaven hates. To be caught in it as a man, and to have no escape until men have done to you what they do to themselves and to each other. And to come at it all from Heaven's side. Could it be any worse than for you to be sent back to the slime and mud of some protozoan community that had only a dim awareness of what it was heading toward, eons away? Merry Christmas.

Oh, I am going to go on singing the carols and loving the Message with all my heart, for as long as life and breath remain. I just want to wake up – feel some awareness, have some appreciation for what it cost – and get ready to receive so it won't all have been for nothing. You see, the television story was much too sweet and simple. Not many of the

sons and daughters of earth were willing to harbor or protect The Real Fugitive. In the end, when the chips were down, none of them did. They all ran away. If it is our hope to become the people who will not run away, we need to get ready – so ready that we will not react in any of our normal, natural ways.

And it wasn't just the Cross, you know. That was only the final emblem of all that had gone before. That was only the summation of what it meant for Jesus to visit us – to live among us as a fugitive because we would have it no other way. Then comes the real question: Why was this His reception? Why does our world react to Him so? That is what makes Christmas real. It is also the very thing that makes His coming necessary in the first place.

We are told that He came out of love. Love was the motive. The only way we can even dimly perceive that kind of love is by looking for what such a deed meant to Him – by pondering the magnitude of a motive that would lead to Advent and Christmas ... to His coming ... HERE!

They say that no one can truly feel in the place of another. But at least we might stop to ponder and wonder until *some* emotion rises within us toward the ONE who would do such a thing for us.

We have always made a great deal, and rightly so, out of the realization that at Christmas, God found out what it was like to live in our shoes. All of us long for understanding, and it is precious truth to know that Christ understands us, having shared our kind of life.

Is it not a little strange then that we make such small attempts to understand *Him*? Is it really so weird that Jesus would tell a rich young ruler to give away all his money and come join Him; or call disciples to drop everything and follow Him; or eat with Zacchaeus, love sinners, or wait for the soldiers in Gethsemane?

There is nothing impractical about Jesus. Being practical is only the method we adopt to achieve the ideals and goals we truly believe in. We simply have different ideas than He does about what we want from life. Jesus is the most practical man who ever lived, if we remember the values He believed in. Yes, His teachings sound strange at first. We are never sure whether to laugh or go pout at some of the things He said. But whether we think them impossible or not, if we grant that God is the highest value in life and that love is the chief principle and greatest

power in Creation, then Jesus is the most practical man who ever walked the earth.

Christmas comes at a terrible cost, and the stark truth remains that no person sees it – no person notices it – without getting caught up in it. Christmas brings a profound disturbance along with its tidings of great joy. Those two always go together in this life, unless somebody is merely putting on an act.

After Christmas, the old world never seems like home again. It may be all right as a training ground – a good place to try on life and knock off some of the rough edges. But there is no room here for what you really seek, just as there was no room here for Him who helps you seek it.

The theme recurs from one end of Christmas to the other, and in all the personal Christmases ever since: No room in the inn ... no place to lay His head ... a borrowed tomb ... *“His own received Him not.”* He lived and died a fugitive, a stranger from eternity, a foreigner in an evil land. Until at last, *“He is not here; He is risen.”* And just precisely then, when the world finally starts weeping and mourning, Heaven breaks into peals of rejoicing once more – to welcome Him back!

The world was no place for Him and had no place for Him, and it could in no way contain Him. And you? Are you really so completely and altogether different? In many ways and at many times, do you not also feel a little like a fugitive? Full of a vast and nameless hunger for that which is too much for this place and cannot be contained in this place? So He went to prepare a place for you. And that is much of what He came to tell you.

If, in the meantime, He sends you on some hard mission fraught with sacrifice and understandable only to a motive of His kind of love – as He Himself was once sent – would that altogether surprise you?

After all, Christmas is not just His coming to us. It is also Him inviting us to come with Him. This thing – this Christmas event, this Incarnation – is beckoning again. And no matter what anybody tells you, it is always terribly and eternally personal. That is always, and exactly, what Christmas is: God getting personal!