

Bringing Joy to a Weary World

I caught a glimpse of a friend's Christmas decorations the other day while looking at social media. Positioned over the fireplace was the phrase, "The Weary World Rejoices."

That reference to a weary world, taken from the famous Christmas carol, "[Oh Holy Night](#)," seems a fitting description of this year. Our world and those who inhabit it are worn down by sickness and lockdowns, elections and unrest. We just want it to all be over so we can get back to our normal lives.

Unfortunately, normality seems unlikely to reappear any time soon, particularly as Joe Biden threatens to start his administration with a national, [100-day mask mandate](#). Yet despite this and other gloomy prospects, the phrase "A Weary World Rejoices" brings great relief and peace, providing a perfect backdrop to this present season of Advent.

Contrary to the typical merriment we associate with Christmas, Advent is intended to be [a time of fasting and mourning](#). "The celebration of Advent," Lutheran pastor and martyr [Dietrich Bonhoeffer once wrote](#), "is possible only to those who are troubled in soul, who know themselves to be poor and imperfect, and who look forward to something greater to come."

This is exactly the posture reflected in the previously mentioned carol, "O Holy Night," as it speaks of Christ's birth in the little Jewish town of Bethlehem over 2,000 years ago. That birth brought hope of "a new and glorious morn'," in which weary, sin-sick souls could feel their worth. As the carol goes on to proclaim, the King of Kings who was laid "in lowly manger" is a friend in trials who "knows our need" and understands our weaknesses. He breaks the chains of the slave and ends oppression.

Thinking about this song led me to ponder other carols. Many of those we know and love are full of joy and merriment, but

they also present the sadness and despair that such joy seeks to dispel. "[Joy to the World](#)," for example, recognizes that sin and sorrow abound upon the earth. "[God Rest You Merry, Gentlemen](#)" commands us not to be dismayed. And probably the chief of all doom and gloom carols is "[I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day](#)," a song birthed by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow amidst the difficulties of the Civil War. Longfellow wrote:

*And in despair I bowed my head;
'There is no peace on earth,' I said;
'For hate is strong,
And mocks the song
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!'*

Thankfully, another stanza follows, proclaiming that "God is not dead, nor doth He sleep," assuring us that "The Wrong shall fail, The Right prevail." This assurance comes because God himself became flesh at Christmastime. St. Athanasius said it best in his work [On the Incarnation](#):

The Lord did not come to make a display. He came to heal and to teach suffering men. For one who wanted to make a display the thing would have been just to appear and dazzle the beholders. But for Him Who came to heal and to teach the way was not merely to dwell here, but to put Himself at the disposal of those who needed Him, and to be manifested according as they could bear it, not vitiating the value of the Divine appearing by exceeding their capacity to receive it.

So often we treat Christmas as a dazzling display. Part of our gloom this particular year has to do with the fact that we can't have that dazzling display of activities and celebrations, for so many heavy burdens overshadow this season. But as Athanasius explains in the passage above, this is exactly why we have Christmas. The babe in the manger was God himself who knew just how full of pain and suffering this

world is, and his coming was meant to quietly bring healing and joy to heavy hearts.

I've often overlooked the pain and despair spelled out in many beloved carols, but this year, that's changing, for suddenly it is more relatable for all of us. Yet even as we recognize that pain and suffering, those of us in this weary world can rejoice in the hope and healing brought by the arrival of God incarnate so many Christmases ago.

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