

DEEP MAGIC

Isaiah 9:2-7; Psalm 96; Titus 2:11-14; Luke 2:1-20

A sermon preached by the Reverend Theodore S. Atkinson
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IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

Christmas Eve is so magical with the candlelight, the beautiful music, and the enchanting story of that -

*Great little one! whose all-embracing birth
Lifts earth to heaven, stoopes heav'n to earth. (Crashaw)*

The Christmas story has worked its magic for over two thousand years. Isaiah, the eagle eyed prophet, foresees Christ's birth and kingdom. St. Paul proclaims God's grace has appeared in the birth of Christ bringing salvation to all. St. Luke writes the most enchanting story of all - the Roman Emperor snaps his fingers and the entire world returns to their ancestral homes. Mary and Joseph travel to Bethlehem in response to the emperor's decree. Mary - a virgin, yet pregnant - gives birth to her own Maker. Angels announce the Lord's birth. In Matthew's Gospel a magical star leads magi - Persian magicians - to the Christ child. The Christmas story is magical.

The magic of Christmas has worked its spell on poets. John Milton, the great Puritan poet, inspired by Isaiah's prophecy, wrote of the first Christmas morning -

*No war or battle's sound
Was heard the world around:
The idle spear and shield were high up hung;
The hooked chariot stood
Unstain'd with hostile blood,
The trumpet spake not to the armed throng
And kings sat still with awe-full eye,
As if they surely knew their sovereign lord was by.*

And the greatest English poet of all, William Shakespeare ^{retells} relates an ancient legend that speaks of the magic of Christmas --

*Some say that ever 'gainst that season comes
Wherein our Saviour's birth is celebrated,
The bird of dawning singeth all night long;
And then, they say, no spirit dare stir abroad,
The nights are wholesome then, no planets strike,
No fairy takes, nor witch hath power to charm,
So hallowed and so gracious is that time.*

One of my favorite books speaks of the magic of Christmas. The great Christian scholar and apologist, C.S. Lewis wrote a wonderful children's story, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. Four young children enter a magical universe, the land of Narnia, through a closet in their uncle's attic. The four children discover that a witch has placed a curse on Narnia so that it's always winter but never Christmas. The witch used powerful magic to curse the land but she wasn't aware of a deeper magic. If she could have looked back into the stillness and the darkness before time dawned, she would have discovered there a deep magic which declared that when a willing and perfect victim was slain in a traitor's stead that "Death itself would start working backwards." How like the Christmas story which proclaims that Jesus was born to die and break Satan's curse.

*He comes to make his blessings flow
Far as the curse is found*

The Christmas story proclaims the magic of redemption by which Christ tenderly yet powerfully raises us out of captivity to sin and death by his birth, death, and resurrection.

The most amazing thing about the Christmas story is its magical power to work belief in skeptics. The Gospel tells an incredible story of fulfilled ancient prophecy, of a virgin giving birth, of the appearance of angels, of a magic star, of a God who becomes a child. How could any well educated modern person ever believe such a fantastic story? Yet, so many skeptical people listen to the story and become enchanted. No story ever told have so many skeptical men and women accepted as true on its own terms. I hear in that story the ring of truth. Ask me why I celebrate Christmas and I'll tell you - the story has worked its magic *on* me and *in* me. Doubts come and go - as they always will - but I confidently confess - God is not, as Franz Kafka implies, benignly indifferent to humanity. In the birth of Jesus I see One who comes to us from realms of endless day down into the darkest depths of our experience.

One skeptic in whom the Christmas magic has broken the curse of unbelief is Dan Wakefield, an acclaimed novelist, who wrote his story several years ago for the *New York Times Magazine*. "Just before Christmas of 1980, I was sitting in a neighborhood bar on Beacon Hill in Boston when a housepainter named Tony remarked out of the blue that he wanted to find a place to go to mass on Christmas Eve. I didn't say

anything, but a thought came into my mind.... I'd like to do that too." Wakefield hadn't gone to church for twenty-five years; not since he left home for Columbia University, a rebellious teenage intellectual. "Yet," he writes, "I found myself that Christmas Eve in King's Chapel." Wakefield didn't attend again until Easter. But in the coming year he began to attend more and more regularly. He had no sudden *born again* experience but found himself slowly turning away from his self-absorbed life toward God as he came more and more under the spell of the Gospel story. And he met people who, like him, were asking questions to which the world had no answer. He found in his church a place where it was safe to entertain magical thoughts that we live in a God haunted universe.

When I speak of the deep magic of Christmas, I'm not implying that Christmas is an illusion created by a master magician with the help of pine scent, candlelight and enchanting music. That reminds me of a story the southern writer, Flannery O'Connor, told. She was in New York attending a party. The writer Mary McCarthy was there. McCarthy, tried to pull the reclusive O'Connor into a conversation. She said, kind of condescendingly, to O'Connor, "Oh, I think the Sacrament of Holy Communion is a wonderful symbol." And O'Connor, a devout Roman Catholic, said, "Well, if it's only a symbol, to hell with it." That's how I feel like responding when people say, "I think the Christmas story is a wonderful symbol – but nothing more." Well, if it's only a symbol, to hell with it. If the magic of this night means anything at all, it means that Someone wonderful has broken through to us from beyond ourselves. If Jesus is not the unique Son of God, then this magical evening, however beautiful, is nothing more than a magician's illusion.

But it is no illusion. It's true. It's really true. I certainly can't prove it – any more than the most important things in life can be proven. But I can invite you to let the Christmas magic work its spell in you. Rather I *should* say that the Christmas story already *is* working its magic *on* you and *in* you in ways you are not even aware. Well, that's what I think. That's what I believe. But I'd like to know what you think about all this. I welcome every opportunity to listen.

God of mystery, magic, and might, we praise and worship you, for you came in silence, while all lay sleeping, to enter our world as a child of humble birth. We thank you for your Son, Jesus Christ, born of the Virgin. In his face we behold your glory, for in his life as in his death is your gift of salvation. By your Spirit, work your Christmas magic, breaking the curse of unbelief that we may give as we have received. Let our whole lives be gifts of praise to you, God of love and peace, in the gracious name of Jesus Christ, your Son, by the power of your Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.