

We got one of those newsy Christmas letters from a woman whose children Jayne taught when we lived in New Jersey. Joan, who now lives in Birmingham, AL, writes about how her step-daughter and other friends and family members planned an 80th birthday party for her this year on April Fool’s Day. No fooling! As the date grew closer Joan sensed that it would be way too much fuss and she had a panic attack. “Cancel this. No party. Tell everybody, ‘April Fool’ I’m only 50,” she said.

Well that didn’t happen. The party did. “An AMAZING party,” she writes, “So many hugs. Friends I didn’t know knew each other connected. I hope you can come next time. Andrea, a policewoman, promised me a parade for my 100th.” “So don’t forget you’re invited to a parade in 20 years” Joan said in closing.

Christmas is Jesus’ birthday, right? Well, yes and no. While the New Testament doesn’t anywhere name Christmas as Jesus’ birthday, there is certainly nothing wrong with celebrating the Incarnation. It is, after all, the dividing point of all human history. Ligonier Ministries asks: “Is Christmas a pagan holiday?” That’s a question that comes up almost every year at Christmastime. There is no direct biblical commandment to celebrate the birth of Jesus on December 25. In fact, there’s much in the New Testament narratives that would indicate that Jesus’ birth in Bethlehem probably did not occur during this time of year.

It just so happens that on the twenty-fifth of December in the Roman Empire there was a pagan holiday linked to mystery religions; and the pagans celebrated their festival on December 25. The Christians didn’t want to participate in that pagan holiday, so they said, “While everybody else is celebrating this pagan festival, we’re going to have our own celebration. We’re going to celebrate the thing that’s most important in our lives, the Incarnation of God in Jesus Christ. So this is going to be a time of joyous festivities, of celebration and worship of our God and King.”

I can’t think of anything more pleasing to Christ than the church celebrating his birthday EVERY YEAR. Keep in mind that the whole principle of annual festivals and celebrations was deeply rooted in ancient Jewish tradition. In the Old Testament, for example, there were times when God emphatically commanded the people to remember certain events with annual celebrations.

By the way, Easter was originally the celebration of Ishtar, the Assyrian and Babylonian goddess of fertility. Her symbols were the egg and the bunny (or did you actually think eggs and bunnies had anything to do with Jesus’ Resurrection?). But the Christian church coming together to celebrate the Resurrection of Jesus is hardly something which God would disapprove. In a way I wish we had MORE annual celebrations of God’s grace and power and love. Christmas is, in my way of thinking, “the most wonderful time of the year.”

In one of his last poems, W. H. Auden describes a Christmas he celebrated in the English countryside with a few close friends. During the week of Christmas, the area was ensconced in a thick fog. No one could go outside. They were forced to settle back and enjoy the warmth, the season, and each other. The poem ends with a line that Auden may have meant as a kind of benediction on his own life: “Thank You, Thank You, Thank You, *Fog*.”

Because Christmas Eve services come after all the noise of the season quiets down, they can often be such moments. The preparations are done. Christmas is upon us. The choir sings. And for a moment we have only the story, the promise, and each other. We hold candles aloft and sing “Silent Night.” Peace and calm descend on us.

But the USA Today headline that I recently saw disagrees: “Americans See More Jingle, Less Jesus in Christmas Celebrations.” So I decided to check it out. The article’s opening line reads: If there ever was a “war on Christmas” in America, Santa may have won. Nine in 10 U.S. adults celebrate the holiday, according to the Pew Research Center. However, that celebration is shifting in a secular direction. And a growing number of Christians discount key elements of the biblical Nativity story.

Just three years ago, 51% of U.S. adults said Christmas for them is more a religious holiday than a cultural one. But that has slipped to 46% in the new Pew survey, released a few weeks ago. Neither does this trend trouble most people. Only 32% say it “bothers” them even somewhat. The survey also finds a “striking shift” in the overall share of people—down from 65% in 2014 to 57% today—who believe four key elements of the biblical Nativity story.

- Jesus was born to a virgin.
- Baby Jesus was laid in a manger.
- Wise men, guided by a star, brought Jesus gifts.
- An angel announced the birth of Jesus to shepherds.

There’s slippage among both Protestants and Catholics, so you know. The Pew report notes the share of white mainline Protestants who believe in the virgin birth, for instance, has dropped from 83% to 71%. And the share of Catholics who believe the birth of Jesus was announced by an angel of the Lord now stands at 82%, down from 90%. And the narrative, not surprisingly, doesn’t fly with most “nones”—people who claim no religious identification: 53% reject all four elements, up from 42% in 2014.

Christian culture-watchers say they’ve seen these trends gathering strength for years. Rather than despair, however, they see openings to share the good news of the Incarnation—God sending his son to be the Savior.

The survey captures how “too many people think Christmas is about a mall and not a manger,” said Ed Stetzer, executive director of the Billy Graham Center at Wheaton College. “On the upside, and Christians always look at the upside, as fewer people celebrate Christmas without knowing the story of Christ, we have the opportunity to tell them why Jesus came, why he lived and died, and ultimately that he rose again—changing everything for Christians, not just one day,” said Stetzer.

More than ever, the world needs to hear the message of heaven come to earth in the son of Mary. Fear fuels many of the attitudes of people who attempt to push Christmas aside. Max Lucado calls fear “the bully in the high school hallway.” Even with Christians, fear drives us to try to produce the perfect Christmas, and then to despair when we inevitably fail. Fear drives us to try to produce, by our own power, the kingdom of God on earth, and when we fail at that, to blame other people. Fear prevents us from seeing and hearing what the angel has come to say: “*Fear not.*”

But just when it seems to be only words, the angel pulls back the curtain, and there is the whole chorus of heaven singing, “*Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor*

rests.” For a moment, earth and heaven come so close that they touch. On Christmas Eve, perhaps in the singing of “Silent Night,” God pulls back the curtain just far enough, and we are joined by the angel chorus. It is enough to sustain us, those of us *waiting for heaven to come down.*

Preachers of the past would often preach a sermon by doing three things: telling a story, expounding the Word of God and ending the sermon with a poem. I don’t believe that in 35 years I have *ever* ended a sermon with a poem, but I will in this sermon—*Waiting for Heaven to Come Down.* The poem you are about to hear is titled “Christmas Questions” by Clayton Libolt.

CHRISTMAS QUESTIONS

When Mary held you close
in Bethlehem that night
and loving you buried
her face into your flesh,
while animal sounds and smells
filled your natal stall,
did she then from fresh skin
sense the faint fragrance of heaven?
Or did she hear
in your whimpering cries,
faint echoes of
another world?
Or touching you
for a moment touch eternity?
Or in a shepherd’s torch catch a facing glimpse
of the glory of a king?
Did she that night in the sweetness of a kiss
taste what no mother had
before or ever after
tasted?
Or was it then,
as now it is,
faith that made her see,
hope she touched and smelled,
and love that she
in your newborn smile
knew to be
the meaning of her child?

Waiting for heaven to come down this Christmas Eve with all of you has been both a privilege and a blessing. Thanks for sharing the candlelight on this Silent Night. And as you leave this place I ask one important thing of you. Don’t keep Christmas to yourself. Go out and share it with others.

In the birth of Jesus, *heaven has come down to earth.* Happy Birthday, Jesus!