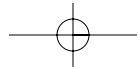
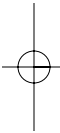
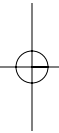


1

ANNUNCIATION



“He had a face . . .”

Before Abraham was,” Jesus said, “I am.” Who can say what he meant? Perhaps that just as his death was not the end of him, so his birth was not the beginning of him.

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Whatever it is that history has come to see in him over the centuries, seen or unseen it was there from the start of history, he seems to be saying, and even before the start. Before Abraham was—before any king rose up in Israel or any prophet to bedevil him, before any patriarch or priest, temple or Torah—something of Jesus existed no less truly for having no name yet or face, something holy and hidden, something implicit as sound is implicit in silence, as the Fall of Rome is implicit in the first atom sent spinning through space at the creation. And more than that.

Jesus does not say that before Abraham was, he was, but before Abraham was, he *is*. No past, no future, but only the present, because only the present is real. Named or unnamed, known or unknown, there neither has been or ever will be real time without him. If he is the Savior of the world as his followers believe, there never has been nor ever will be a world without salvation.

But even for the timeless, to enter time is to divide it into before and after, then and now, just as to enter space is to divide it into here and there, me and you. Whatever the story of Jesus may be to the high angels, to us it must, like any other story, involve a beginning. The place where his story begins is a place. The time when it begins is a time. The person it begins with is a girl:

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“And in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God unto a city of Galilee, named Nazareth, to a virgin espoused to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David; and the virgin’s name was Mary.

“And the angel came in unto her, and said, ‘Hail, thou that art highly favored, the Lord is with thee: blessed art thou among women.’ And when she saw him, she was troubled at his saying, and cast in her mind what manner of salutation this should be.

“And the angel said unto her, ‘Fear not, Mary: for thou hast found favor with God. And, behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a son, and shalt call his name JESUS. He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Highest: and the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of his father David: and he shall reign over the house of Jacob forever; and of his kingdom there shall be no end.’

“Then said Mary unto the angel, ‘How shall this be, seeing I know not a man?’

“And the angel answered and said unto her, ‘The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee: therefore also that holy thing which

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shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God. And, behold, thy cousin Elisabeth, she hath also conceived a son in her old age: and this is the sixth month with her, who was called barren. For, with God nothing shall be impossible.'

“And Mary said, ‘Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word.’ And the angel departed from her.” (KJV)

The angel says, "Don't be afraid, Mary." He tells her not to be afraid because the floor has failed her and the sheltering wall no longer gives her shelter; not to be afraid because most of what is familiar to her has faded and flaked away like a painting. Heaven has flooded in. And heaven kneels before her now with outstretched wings. But she is not to be afraid.

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She is not to be afraid of all that lies beyond her: a lonely birth on a winter's night, a child she was never to understand and who never had time to give her much understanding, the death she was to witness more lonely and more terrible than the birth. "*Behold,*" the angel says, "you will conceive in your womb and bear a son." Behold. He is telling her to open her eyes.

The Annunciation. As the ancient prophecies foretold, it is a virgin who is to bear the holy child. "The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee," the angel announces, "and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee." It is not old Joseph but God who is the father. Paul, Mark, Matthew, the earliest writers about Jesus, say nothing of a virgin birth, but by the time Luke wrote his Gospel, it had come to seem that nothing less wonderful could account for the wonders he was gospeling. This extraordinary life could have had a beginning no less extraordinary. History creates heroes, but saints seem to arrive under their own steam. Evil evolves, but holiness happens.

Mary pondered these things in her heart, and countless generations have pondered them with her.

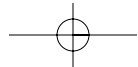
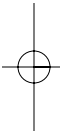
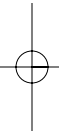
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Mary's head is bowed, and she looks up at the angel through her lashes. There is possibly the faintest trace of a frown on her brow. "How shall this be, seeing that I know not a man?" she asks, and the angel, the whole Creation, even God himself, all hold their breath as they wait for what she will say next.

"Be it unto me according to thy word," she says, and jewels blossom like morning glories on the arch above them. Everything has turned to gold.

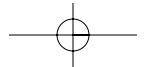
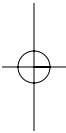
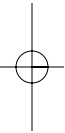
A golden angel. A golden girl. They are caught up together in a stately, golden dance. Their faces are grave. From a golden cloud between them and above, the Leader of the dance looks on.

The announcement has been made and heard. The world is with child.



2

NATIVITY



History creates heroes... holiness happens

*Some say that ever 'gainst that season comes
Wherein our Savior'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,*

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“So hallowed and so gracious is the time”—these lines from the first scene of Hamlet in a sense say it all. We tend to think of time as progression, as moment following moment, day following day, in relentless flow, the kind of time a clock or calendar measures. But we experience time also as depth, as having quality as well as quantity—a good time, a dangerous time, an auspicious time, a time we mark not by its duration but by its content.

On the dark battlements of Elsinore, Marcellus speaks to his companions of the time of Jesus’ birth. It is a *hallowed* time he says, a holy time, a time in which life grows still like the surface of a river so that we can look down into it and see glimmering there in its depth something timeless, precious, other. And a *gracious* time, Marcellus says—a time that we cannot bring about as we can bring about a happy time or a sad time but time that comes upon us as grace, as a free and unbidden gift. Marcellus explains that Christmas is a time of such holiness that the cock crows the whole night through as though it is perpetually dawn, and thus for once, even the powers of darkness are powerless.

Horatio’s answer is equally instructive. “So have I heard and do *in part* believe,” he says to Marcellus, thus speaking, one feels, not just for himself but for Shakespeare and for us. In part believe it. At Christmas time it is hard even for the unbeliever not to believe in something, if not in everything. Peace on earth, good will to men; a dream of innocence that is good to hold

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onto even if it is only a dream; the mystery of being a child; the possibility of hope—not even the canned carols piped out over the shopping center parking plaza from Thanksgiving on can drown it out entirely.

For a moment or two, the darkness of disenchantment, cynicism, doubt, draw back at least a little, and all the usual worldly witcheries lose something of their power to charm. Maybe we cannot manage to believe the Christmas story with all our hearts. But as long as the moment lasts, we can at least believe that it is of all things the one most worth believing. And that may not be as far as it sounds from what belief is. For as long as the moment lasts, that hallowed, gracious time.

But no moment lasts forever, and it is not for twelve months a year that the bird of dawning singeth all night long. Darkness inevitably returns with all its shadows and ambiguities. The story of the birth of Jesus has been subjected to the most critical scrutiny by believers and unbelievers alike, and nowhere have the Nativity passages of Luke and Matthew been more rigorously and objectively analyzed than within the purview of biblical scholarship, where no fact or claim has been allowed to go unchallenged. The when, where, how of the Nativity have been for generations and continue to be the subject of endless conjecture.

Even the date of his birth is uncertain because Matthew and Luke do not agree with each other. Neither of them can be

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reconciled with the traditional view that he was born during the first year of the Christian era as it has come to be reckoned. Luke says he was born in the year when Cyrenius, the Roman governor of Syria, took a census of Palestine, whereas Matthew says it was during the reign of Herod the Great. The difficulty is that Cyrenius's census is known to have been taken in AD 6 and Herod died in 4 BC. Thus Jesus was born either six years later than has been generally supposed or at least four years earlier. And the place of his birth is equally debatable. Bethlehem is the town traditionally named King David's town, but that may have come about simply in order to bring history into line with the Old Testament prophecy that Bethlehem was where the Messiah as the Son of David was destined to come from. There are good reasons for believing that he may actually have been born in Nazareth.

And finally, the how of his birth, all the poetry that has grown up around it—the wise men and the star, the shepherds keeping watch over their flocks by night, and the hymn the angels sang. If someone had been there with a camera, would he have recorded any of it, or was the birth of Jesus no more if no less wonderful than any other birth? Whatever the answer, it can be based only on faith. There is no other way. The kind of objective truth a camera could have recorded is buried beneath the weight of two thousand years.

But there is of course another kind of truth. Whether he was born in 4 BC or AD 6, in Bethlehem or Nazareth, whether there were multitudes of the heavenly host to hymn the glory of it or

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just Mary and her husband—when the child was born the whole course of human history was changed. That is a truth as unassailable as any truth. Art, music, literature, Western culture itself with all its institutions and Western man's whole understanding of himself and his world—it is impossible to conceive how differently things would have turned out if that birth had not happened whenever, wherever, however it did. And there is a truth beyond that: For millions of people who have lived since, the birth of Jesus made possible not just a new way of understanding life but a new way of living it.

For better or worse, it is a truth that, for twenty centuries, there have been untold numbers of men and women who, in untold numbers of ways, have been so grasped by the child who was born, so caught up in the message he taught and the life he lived, that they have found themselves profoundly changed by their relationship with him. And they have gone on proclaiming, as the writers of the Gospels proclaimed before them, that through the birth of Jesus a life-giving power was released into the world which to their minds could have been no less than the power of God himself. This is the central truth that Matthew and Luke are trying to convey in their accounts of the Nativity. And it was a truth which no language or legend seemed too extravagant to convey. What the birth meant—meant to them, to the world—was the truth that mattered to them most and, when all is said and done . . . perhaps the only truth that matters to anyone.

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Matthew and Luke's Gospels come ultimately from the same place that prayers do, from that dimension of the self where out of their own richest silence they sought to commune with Silence itself, to make themselves heard by it and to hear. "Faith is," said the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews, ". . . the conviction of things not seen," and their art is their prayer to be able to see and make seen.

When it comes to the birth of a child, we are all of us romantics. A new life, a new hope, innocence coming into an old and weary world—if there is beauty anywhere, surely it is here. And yet heaven knows when it comes to depicting other events in the life of Jesus, especially the events centered around his passion and death, again there is beauty, but other things too. Pain and contradiction, bitterness and despair. The body on the cross is a symbol of hope and innocence no less than the babe in the manger. Down through the centuries painters have not shrunk back from the fact that real blood ran down from the thorny crown, that the flesh was lacerated by scourging, the mouth open to the cry of dereliction—"My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"—the face of the mother disfigured by grief as she held the corpse of her child on her knees. There is beauty too, the beauty of peace in the midst of agony, and of victory in the ashes of defeat. It is a beauty deep in shadow. But when it comes to the Nativity, there is no shadow. There is no attempt to represent the throes of Mary's labor or the bloody and howling entrance of the child into the winter world. In one

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form or another, the manger always appears as a place of beauty and holiness and never as a cold and cheerless symbol of the world's indifference. "Silent, night, holy night, all is calm, all is bright." Down through the ages there have been countless variations on this theme, but the theme is always the same. Not a hair of Mary's head is out of place. The baby has been washed and dried, the stable swept.

But if there is the beauty of what is majestic and powerful, there is the beauty also of what is humble and powerless. Like any child, Jesus as a child has one power only and that is the power to love and be loved which is of all powers the most powerful because it alone can conquer the human heart; at the same time it is of all powers the most powerless, because it can do nothing except by consent. It is of the very essence of love to leave us free to respond or not to respond because the moment it attempts to force our hand, it is no longer love but coercion, and what it elicits from us is no longer love but obedience. The greatest single argument against the existence of God is the presence of evil in the world, and to the degree that the Christian faith attempts to answer it, its answer is all tied up in this. The argument is simply stated: If there is a God who is both good and all powerful, why do terrible things happen in the world? Why does God allow us to murder and wage wars? Why does he allow us to remain indifferent to each other's needs so that the poor go uncared for and children starve and in a sense all of us go hungry if only for the peace and understanding that

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the world cannot give? If there is a God, why did he not with his great goodness make things right in the first place, or why does he not with his great power intervene in the affairs of the world to make things right at least in the second place, now? What Christianity in effect seems to say is that God could presumably do these things—could have turned us out perfectly as an inventor turns out a perfect invention or could step in when we get out of line and move us around like pawns on a chessboard. But as Christianity understands it, God does not want us related to him as an invention to an inventor or pawns to a cosmic kibitzer. He wants us related to him as children are related to their father. He wants us in other words to love him, and if our love is to be spontaneous and real, we must be free also not to love him with all its grim consequences of human suffering. Evil exists in the world not because God is indifferent or powerless or absent but because man is free, and free he must be if he is to love freely, free he must be if he is to be human.

Like any baby, Jesus as a baby does not judge or exhort or puzzle the world with his teaching. He makes no demands, threatens no punishment, offers no rewards. The world is free to take him or leave him. He does not rule the world from his mother's lap but, like any child, is himself at the mercy of the world.

In trying to say too much, piety always runs the risk of saying too little or saying it wrong, and the great pitfall of Christian art, especially when it tries to portray the birth of Christ, is