



Christmas Day (I)

The Beginning

[RCL] Isaiah 9:2-7; Psalm 96; Titus 2:11-14; Luke 2:1-14 (15-20)

Students of history often find themselves confronted by difficult realities: there are wars, famines, stories of human tragedy and strife, but undoubtedly one of the *greatest* challenges to anyone beginning to explore our past is the whole B.C. versus A.D. thing.

If you think about it, it's really crazy! Who in the world would come up with this kind of system? I say, "In the year 50..." and immediately, you have to stop and say, "Wait, which year 50? A.D. 50, like the 50 that comes *before* A.D. 70? Or 50 B.C., which comes *after* 70 B.C. but *before* A.D. 70?" It is like an unlimited stream of "Who's on first?" jokes just waiting to happen.

B.C. starts with whenever time began, maybe the year 16 billion B.C., and then you have to count backward so that the year 400 is the *past* for people living in the year 300, and their unimaginably distant future is the year 10. And then, at an apparently arbitrary place, time just starts over again, and we keep on going with A.D. for two thousand twenty-one years. Common sense, and untold *thousands* of school children, would tell us that this is the worst system of dating ever.

But as confusing as it may be, the B.C./A.D. system is not only reasonable, it's also unavoidable: because on Christmas Eve, in a stable, in the little town of Bethlehem, at the very turn of A.D. 1, literally everything changed — so much so that our conceptions of time and history and even what it is to be a human being all had to go back to the drawing board as *time started anew*.

In the account of Creation in Genesis, we see the Garden of Eden: a world in which humanity lives in perfect harmony and friendship with God. All that they could want is freely given to them — they reach up like children to their Father, and pluck their food from the trees; they are at peace with all the world. There is no violence, no bloodshed, no darkness, no sickness, nor death, but only peace, light, and joy.

Until one day, Adam and Eve get a bright idea: They have been told that there is *one* tree in the Garden of which they cannot eat, the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, for if they eat of it, death will enter the world. But then... along comes the serpent.

God knows the reality of evil, God knows that there is something that attempts to turn from him and worship itself, and God had sought to shield Adam and Eve from the horror of this reality, but on the day that they ate the fruit, their eyes were opened. At that moment, Adam and Eve *became* the reality of that rebellion against God, they enact the evil from which God had sought to protect them. At that moment, Adam and Eve rejected God and turned away from him.

But turning away from God is no easy task because literally everything that *is* comes from God: everything that *is* is created by God, sustained by God. The whole creation is held together from millisecond to millisecond by God's goodness and love. So, when you try to turn away from God, there is literally no place to go where he is not. There is nothing that is not a sign of his love, of his presence — and so you literally have to turn to that which *does not exist* — to nothingness, to darkness, to death.

Death, sickness, and strife were ushered into the world in the fall of Adam and Eve, not as a punishment, not as a curse from God, but simply as the necessary result of turning away from the source of all that is. In turning away from life, all that is left to us is death. And so, from the prehistoric story of the Fall, through ancient times, right on down until the first Christmas Eve, things continued in the same vein: people were born and lived, were plagued by ignorance and selfishness, and eventually died.

In St. Athanasius' book *On the Incarnation*, he asks why it is that God let this happen. Couldn't he just rewind time to right before Adam and Eve made the decision to reject him? Couldn't he just hit the reset button and make it all okay again? He could, says Athanasius, but then it would all have happened again, and again, and again. Humanity, created in the image and likeness of God, would be a never-ending loop of rejecting God. So, what's a loving creator to do?

A staple conceit of American sitcoms and road trip movies are the brother and sister in the back of the minivan who spend hours arguing over electronics, radio stations, and elbow space, until an exasperated parent finally says, "Don't make me come back there!"

For all of B.C., for the whole of human history, the Word of God came to the prophets, commanding each to proclaim to God's people, "Repent! Return to the Lord – Don't make me come down there!" But after millions of years of us not listening, the all-knowing, Almighty, eternal God the Son, through whom all things were created, *stopped the minivan of time*, descended from the infinity of the captain's chair into the spatio-temporality of the *furthest* reaches of the backseat, and was born as a tiny, helpless baby to a poor family in middle-of-nowhere Palestine, and the angels all held their breath as time, reality, and human history screeched to a grinding halt.

Jesus was born. Fully human and fully God. And when we say fully human, we don't just mean a regular Joe — we mean *fully* human! You and I are partially human, a tiny reflection of the image and likeness of God that each of us was created to be: we are the shadow of human, we are human light — but in Jesus, we see what it is to be a full human, a one-hundred percent human: Jesus is a person so full of prayer, so full of love, so connected with God that sickness cannot stand to be around him, and everywhere he goes,

healing flows from him. He is so human that he has dominion over Creation and evil flees in terror from him. He is so human that the winds and the waters obey him, and death suddenly becomes powerless when he is around.

And he is *fully* God — he is not someone with good ideas who teaches us about God, or someone who spiritually has God within him. He is actually God the Son, incarnate. The immortal, invisible, inconceivable God, walking with us, talking to us, hearing our sad stories, and laughing at our jokes. He is God with a human face, God with human hands and human feet.

We would not return to God, so God came down to us, not to chastise us or punish us; not to take away our phones or switch the dial to talk radio: instead, God came down to eternally unite his nature with ours, the Human and the Divine, perfectly united in the one person of Jesus Christ, so that we would begin to be cured of sin, cured of sickness, cured of evil, cured of death. Jesus is our Savior, and through him, human nature is liberated for the love, the peace, and the joy of union with God. One sometimes hears Christmas referred to as Jesus' birthday, but this night is *so* much more than that: it is the birthday of true humanity, of life itself. It is the beginning of the total defeat of evil, the total defeat of death.

We are sometimes tempted to spend Christmas either attempting to enact a Norman Rockwell painting of the perfect Christmas or overwhelmed with sorrow because of our total failure to make it work, but I am here tonight to tell you: Christmas is *not* a holiday about food, family, and friends (that was Thanksgiving). Christmas is *not* a celebration of consumerism and shopping (that's basically every day). Christmas is *not* a day to salute the flag or plant a tree or bake a ham or watch the game.

Christmas is the most monumental, catastrophic, astonishing, bizarre event in the whole history of time. For on this night, God became human, that humankind might be forever united with God. Let all earth keep silence before this sacred mystery, and let all of us stand in awe, with the angels and shepherds, before the astonishing love revealed in this Baby Jesus, our Lord and our God.

Fr. Bertie Pearson serves as Rector of Grace Episcopal Church in Georgetown, Texas, and as Dean of the Austin Area Convocation of Clergy. He also produces the popular podcast *The History of Christianity with Bertie Pearson*. This podcast is an exploration of the ideas and themes which continue to shape the Christian faith, and is available on Spotify, iTunes, and wherever fine podcasts are distributed. Before his current parish, Bertie served both Spanish and English-language churches in Austin and San Francisco, played drums in the band *Poolside*, and toured as a DJ. He now lives a much more sedate life with his wife, Dr. Rabel Pearson, their two children, a small room full of dusty records, and a very goodhearted Australian Shepard named *Ida*.