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John 1:1-5, 10-14

CHRISTMAS MAGIC

Christmas is often described as a “magical” time of year. Now, there are several definitions of “magic” and some of them clearly are *not* what people mean when they talk about Christmas being a magical season. There is the Harry Potter kind of magic—a kind of magic that practices the use of charms and spells. That’s not the kind of magic people intend to imply for Christmas. Then there is the Siegfried and Roy kind of magic—in which one exercises the slight of hand or performs conjuring acts in order to entertain. That doesn’t fit Christmas either. But there is a third definition of magic that I think fits what most people mean when they talk about Christmas being “magical.” This definition of magic is understood as a *mysterious quality of enchantment*. A mysterious quality of enchantment.

I think that this is exactly what many of us find magical about the season: there is a mysterious enchanting quality to the season where our ordinary world is transformed. It’s sort of like what happens after a fresh snowfall. After a fresh snow we wake up and look out our windows and our ordinary world has been transformed into a winter wonderland. It’s magical looking. Everything looks more beautiful than normal—our ordinary street looks beautiful, our lawn looks beautiful, even the garbage can looks beautiful! It’s magical!

Christmas is a lot like that for many people. It is a season where the ordinariness of our lives is transformed into something beautiful. We decorate our homes in little twinkling lights, giving the dark streets and neighborhoods an enchanting quality. Even the most humble of homes is transformed with garlands and wreaths and ribbons and shiny ornaments. Children

understand that the ordinary is transformed into something magical as they await Santa, and the excitement of waking up to discover that this mysterious stranger has come and gone, leaving behind bulging stockings filled with surprises. Christmas often prompts acts of generosity and kindness in people. We may be more giving than we normally are, more apt to express our gratitude to friends, family, and co-workers. Our newspapers and television news stories highlight situations of exceptional generosity and kindness during this season. It is this mysterious, enchanting quality about Christmas that prompts many of us to think of it as “magical.” Our ordinary world is transformed.

Not everyone, however, embraces the magic of the season. Some people will point out that some of this Christmas magic is a lot of “theatrics”—that none of us is as generous or as happy or as selfless as we like to pretend at Christmas. They will ask, “Where are all those do-gooders all the rest of the year?” These scoffers will point out that just like a fresh snowfall will evaporate with the rising of the sun, leaving behind mud puddles and piles of trash, when Christmas is over, they say, we’ll find all the trash of our lives left behind as well. We’ll be left with garbage bags of discarded wrapping papers, over-extended credit card debt, and thicker waistlines.

Some of this criticism is indeed warranted. The commercialism of Christmas is extreme and has clearly eclipsed the spiritual meaning of the season. There *is* far too much spending, and far too much eating and drinking and over-indulging of all sorts. And much of the charitable actions we see take place at Christmas do not continue with the same vigor during the rest of the year nor do they tend to address underlying systemic inequalities.

All of these criticisms may be valid. But could it also be true that the magic of the season, the mysterious quality of enchantment, serves an important purpose?

My sister-in-law is a social worker and she shared about a time she was leading a discussion among a group of incarcerated men. It was the Christmas season so the men were asked to share stories of Christmases in their past. As one great big man told a story about a special Christmas memory from his childhood, giant tear drops began to stream down his cheeks. The memory of that magical moment remained powerful for him all those years.

If Christmas is nothing but a momentary escape from our troubled lives, then, true enough, it is just a bunch of window dressing without much meaning. But I don't think escapism is what brings tears to the eyes of imprisoned men. I think the power of Christmas, the magic of Christmas, is that it allows us to see our world with transformed eyes. Yes, there is trash beneath all the beautiful snow. God knows it's there. That's precisely why God comes to us in the first place, because God also has the power to see all the trash of our lives and to bring forth something beautiful from you and me and our world. At the heart of Christmas is a mysterious enchantment of the grandest proportions: God's love for us. It is a love that reaches into our ugliness, our darkness, our pain, our shame with a transforming love. At Christmas, we are given a vision of the transformed world God intends.

God so loved you and me and this world that God came to dwell among us. The gift of Christmas, the first gift and the only gift of consequence, is the gift of God's love—for you, for me. You are radically, unconditionally loved. That's what Jesus came to teach us: that we are loved and to show us how we can bring this love into our hearts and how we can live this love out in our lives.

It is this love that is the true magic of the season because this love transforms our ordinary lives into something extraordinary. God loves us fiercely, unconditionally, and steadfastly. And we are transformed by this love into people share this love with strangers and

friends, and family, and yes, even enemies. In other words, we are transformed by God's mysterious quality of enchantment.

There are some people sitting in such deep darkness this year for whom this season holds no magic whatsoever. I imagine the families who lost children to school gun violence may not be able to find much magic in the season this year. Or the people of Kentucky who lost everything they own in the deadly tornados might struggle to feel the magic. And the grieving family members of the more than 800,000 Americans who have died from Covid-19 may find it hard to feel the magic. Maybe you this year are so weighed down by some hardship or pain that you too do not feel much Christmas magic. It was precisely into such a world of pain and brokenness, that Christ was born. And he came to transform this world with the power of love. God assures us that there is no darkness that can conquer God's love. God's love is the light shining in the darkness, the light that no darkness can ever overcome.

The true magical moment of Christmas is when we receive into our hearts the transforming love of God. The real magic of Christmas occurs when we allow God's love to transform us and all of the trash and pain of our lives, into something beautiful. The real magic of Christmas happens when we then carry this love of God into our world, into the darkest places, into the pain, into the grief, into the brokenness, and then allow God to use us to shine forth a transforming kind of beauty. That's the real magic.