

## When Heaven Comes To Stay

**Texts: Zechariah 2:10-13; Revelation 2:1-5**

**12/19/10**

### I

What would life be like if it was always Christmas? I'm not sure, but I don't think I would like it very much.

There are few places you can try it. One is in Hiawasse, Georgia at store called (you guessed it) "Always Christmas". Six days a week life is a never ending experience of flocked Christmas Trees, Elf on the Shelf, spiced cider, and reruns of Home Alone.

We work so hard to do Christmas for a few weeks that the thought of doing it all year is exhausting. There's something about buying fake snowballs to throw in the August Georgia heat that doesn't work for me.

Most people beyond the age of 12 aren't ready for it to be always Christmas. We aren't up to the job. It's hard to be that jolly all the time.

But there is a different possibility. And it's probably easier to imagine. Imagine life if it was never Christmas.

## II

**C.S. Lewis wrote a classic children's book titled *The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe* about that very possibility. He took it a little further. Three children step through a wardrobe into the Land of Narnia where they discover it is "always winter and never Christmas".**

A witch has cast a spell over the land, and for 100 years it has been winter. No let up in the cold, no thawing of the ice, no sign of any other possibility. The world is frozen like a brick.

It's not hard to imagine that kind of world, no matter what the temperature is. The biblical story is set in world that seems stuck and frozen. The words of the prophet Zechariah are for God's people who had been in exile in Babylon for almost one hundred years. Their lives seemed frozen in place. Was there any reason to hope for a thaw in the world as they had come to know it? Where was God?

Many years ago a poet named Christina Rossetti wrote what became a Christmas carol we hardly sing any more. In the first stanza she describes what the world was like to which the Christ was coming:

*In the bleak midwinter frosty wind made moan, earth stood hard as iron, water like a stone; snow had fallen, snow on snow, snow on snow, in the bleak midwinter, long ago.*

*In the Bleak Midwinter.* I have no idea how cold it was in Bethlehem when Jesus was born, but we get the poet's point. The world seems cold and unchangeable, frozen solid, with little hope for much else.

Perhaps you have felt the frost yourself. We turn on the news and discover that the world isn't much different than when we went to bed last night. And we find sometimes we aren't much different. The family struggle feels familiar. The economic stress is persistent. Our losses seem fresh. Our love affair with God is strained. Dare we hope for Christmas?

In Narnia it was always winter and never Christmas.

### III

**Last week we began to talk about a crack in the ice. We spoke of the birth of Jesus. Not just an annual celebration of kindness, optimism, and childlike wonder but a divine thaw in a frozen world.**

When Aslan, the lion Christ figure, shows up in Lewis' story something begins to happen. The ice begins to melt. Not all at once, but here and there we see some life where we hadn't seen it before. Some green springs up from beneath the snow.

Zechariah in his prophecy says to the frozen exiles of his day:

*“Shout and be glad O daughter of Zion. For I am coming, and I will live among you,” declares the Lord... “Be still before the Lord, all mankind, because he has roused himself from his holy dwelling.”*

John who walked with Jesus in what seemed to be his stuck and immovable world, left us this testimony in his gospel:

*In him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness but the darkness has not understood it.*

An amazing thing happens in Lewis' story at this point. Father Christmas (Santa Claus) shows up. The witch's powers are failing. For one hundred years there had been no sign of him, but the coming of Aslan changes that. It's still winter. But now it's sometimes Christmas.

We make too little of the Christmas birth of Jesus. I'm not talking about the cultural party we've come to call Christmas – we make too much of it. I am talking about unlikely truth that with Jesus the great thaw in this world has begun. Here and there life springs up. Here and there the world is healed. Here and there hope takes root in our personal and public lives because we discover that Christmas isn't our achievement. It's God's gift to a frozen world.

Jesus isn't just a warm oasis in the bleak midwinter. He is clue to where this world is headed. When Father Christmas shows up in *the Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe* he doesn't had out sugar plums to keep the children quiet and happy. He gives gifts of another kind. To Peter he gives a sword and shield to fight evil. Susan receives a bow and arrow and magical horn that will summon help whenever it is blown. Lucy receives a dagger and a magical vial that restores the health of anyone injured.

These aren't gifts for the passive. It appears winter won't give up without a struggle. The battle is on. But Christmas comes bringing the gifts we need to serve Christ while an old world, and an old life melts away and we wait for a new one to be born.

It's still winter. But sometimes it's Christmas.

#### IV

**So can we hope for something more? Dare we imagine a world where it's "always Christmas"? Not because we will make it happen, but because God has promised heaven will not be stopped until it does happen?**

Christina Rossetti in her carol *The Bleak Midwinter* spoke of that frozen world into which Christ was born. But that was only the first verse. Here's the second:

*Our God, heaven cannot hold him, nor earth sustain; Heaven and earth shall flee away when he comes to reign; In the bleak midwinter a stable sufficed the Lord God Almighty, Jesus Christ.*

At the first coming, on the first Christmas, a stable in a cold world was good enough for the Lord. But on that Christmas yet to come heaven and earth she says will not be big enough.

The apostle John who wrote of the first coming that "the light shines in the darkness but the darkness has not overcome it" has something altogether different to say in the Revelation about the second one:

*Now the dwelling of God is with men and he will live with them. They will be his people and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.*

Scripture says there is a greater Christmas. And on that Christmas the great thaw in our world and in our lives will be complete. On that Christmas heaven will not come to our world for a visit. Heaven will change earth forever. The Lord of heaven will come to stay.

We are bound to make too little of Christmas when we don't make enough of the return of Jesus Christ. In what Christmas do we hope? The kind that goes into the box on December 26<sup>th</sup> or the kind that is so large heaven and earth as we know it cannot contain it?

We live what we hope for, don't we? You and I know people whose hopes aren't exhausted by what they read in the paper this morning. They get up with their eyes on what sometimes seems like a distant horizon. But they live differently because of it. Are we using the blessings of Christmas in joy and in the service of the Christ who is coming? Or are we afraid to look beyond the manger and the small and vulnerable child who is in it?

## V

"Always Christmas." It can't possibly survive outside of Hiawassee, Georgia and a few other isolated places. It takes too much heavy lifting. We're not up to it.

That is unless the God of heaven gives it. And the God of heaven comes to stay.

*He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!"*

Perhaps "Always Christmas, never winter?" Are we hoping?