

JO SWINNEY

The
W H O L E
Christmas
Story



AN ADVENT ADVENTURE
THROUGH GENESIS, REVELATION
AND POINTS IN BETWEEN

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A large, hand-drawn circle with a small shopping cart icon at the bottom center. The circle is drawn with a thick, slightly irregular black line. At the very bottom center of the circle, there is a small, detailed illustration of a shopping cart filled with various items, including what looks like a Christmas tree and other festive goods.

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Contents

Acknowledgements	9
Introduction	11

1 Made whole

1 December	Made good	17
2 December	Meet the maker.....	21
3 December	In God's image	24
4 December	Purpose.....	27
5 December	Marital bliss.....	30
6 December	The harmonious whole	33

2 Broken

7 December	Alienated from God	38
8 December	Displaced from home.....	41
9 December	Wounded and wounding	44
10 December	Abusing creation	47
11 December	Broken bodies.....	51
12 December	Suffering in mind	54
13 December	Broken cisterns.....	57

3 Waiting in hope

14 December	Reasons to be hopeful.....	63
15 December	Hoping for forgiveness.....	66

16 December	Hoping for justice	69
17 December	Hoping for peace	72
18 December	Hoping for restoration	76
19 December	Hoping for an eternal ruler	80
20 December	Hope deferred.....	83

4 God among us

21 December	Light of the world	88
22 December	One of us.....	91
23 December	God revealed.....	94
24 December	Love in human form	97
25 December	For the least, the last and the lost.....	100
26 December	The defeat of death	103
27 December	The gift of life	106

5 Redeemed life

28 December	Peace with God.....	111
29 December	Restoring creation	114
30 December	Belonging and love	117
31 December	Dual citizenship	120
1 January	A new way	123
2 January	Peace beyond understanding.....	126
3 January	Spread the news.....	129
4 January	The messy middle	132
5 January	Ready when you are	135
6 January	Over the horizon.....	138

Introduction

WHEN WE TALK ABOUT THE CHRISTMAS STORY, we are generally covering the ground between the angel Gabriel's visit to Mary and the escape to Egypt by Joseph, Mary and the infant Jesus. These events are recounted in the gospels of Matthew and Luke: 120 verses between them. The details are few and familiar. A young virgin suddenly pregnant, her fiancé shamed. A reassuring dream for Joseph and a soothing visit to an older relative for Mary. A journey to a far-off town for a census, the discovery that all guest rooms are full and the newborn Jesus laid in a manger. A visit from some shepherds and the Magi, whose arrival alerts King Herod to a pretender to his throne.

Understandably, at this time of year we think a great deal about this story. You might imagine that a book created to help you engage with the season on a spiritual level would take you through the relevant sections of Matthew and Luke, perhaps coming at them from a new angle or showing them in a different light. There are many wonderful Advent devotionals that do this. I have used some and found them helpful.

But I want to do something different here. I want us to think about how Christmas sits in the whole Christian story, from Genesis to Revelation. I want to take us up a steep and winding path to a high vantage point, from where we can survey the horizon in all directions. Or, to use a specifically 21st-century metaphor, let's play with Google Earth, starting in outer space and zooming in further and further until we are sitting, mesmerised and worshipful, by a makeshift cradle and the God-baby inside it. Who is Jesus, and what is his cosmic significance? Who was he to the generations who came and went before his birth, and who is he to those of us living long after? Why did God take on human form, and what do we do with all those not-completely-fulfilled promises of healing and deliverance?

Please don't expect tidy answers to those huge questions in these pages. They aren't here. But the Bible does take us into the heart of God's purposes for his creation and, if we come humbly and open to the task, he will open our eyes as we read and explore over this Advent season.

On a personal note, I have to confess that, over the years, hearing the Christmas story told in a secular context has sometimes made me cringe a bit inside. It all seemed so far-fetched when given an airing among purportedly rational, educated and sophisticated people: a quaint and primitive fairy story for those willing to suspend disbelief in the name of faith. I wondered if in my heart of hearts, I actually believed it. I suspected it would take a real test to show me my true mettle as a self-professed Jesus follower.

I started work on this book in September 2019. On 28 October, just under two months later, I spent the morning writing. I was on track to hand in a completed manuscript by my January deadline and my mum, who has worked with me on all my books, was in the wings to go through an early draft as soon as I had one to give her.

After lunch, I did a superficial house tidy and packed for a few days away. Around 3.30 pm, I set off with my husband, Shawn, and our daughters, Alexa and Charis, for a half-term break in a remote cottage we had rented. My husband Shawn's phone rang five minutes into our journey, as we were driving down a steep road outside Bath called Brassknocker Hill. It was my uncle Steve, and he asked Shawn to pull over and give him a call back.

Once they had spoken, Shawn got back in the car with red eyes and said we had to go back home. Something really bad had happened, and he'd tell us what it was when we had got into the house. Both girls started crying and asking questions. I told them whatever the news was, God was good, and he loved us and we'd be okay.

The news was life-altering. My parents had been in a terrible car accident in South Africa, where they had been on a work trip with the charity they had founded, A Rocha. My mother had been killed along with two colleagues and friends, Chris and Susanna Naylor. The driver was alive, and my father was in critical condition. I'm so glad I can tell you he miraculously survived with no long-term physical injuries.

Subsequent weeks and months have been painful and dark. Grief hits me like a kind of reverse labour, with contractions coming further apart with time. The intensity of loss can take my breath away, but it recedes and somehow life goes on.

Even at the beginning, when there was barely a second's reprieve from the howling hurt and shock, I had no questions for God. I realised my belief that he was real, he was good and he was loving went deep. I sensed the Holy Spirit brooding over the troubled waters of my distress. Silent, yes, but present, working redemption even as I thrashed around, fearing I'd drown.

My mum loved Christmas. She would start playing wall-to-wall carols on 1 December (we'd banned her from starting earlier), bake dozens of mince pies and spend hours lovingly wrapping the gifts she'd been stockpiling all year. Our Christmas tree was always the best tree of all the trees, and she'd often sit in the glow of its lights late in the evening in childlike delight.

We did our best to celebrate our first Christmas without her, telling ourselves she'd have wanted us to give the grandchildren a happy day. Without her, our clan numbers 17, and we were all together. I'm not sure we celebrated, but we managed to get through it. Christmas without her is never going to be the same.

One thing I know: the Christmas baby has given me a sure and certain hope that one day I will see her again and we will be together in the unveiled presence of the triune God. As Zechariah said after the birth of his own miraculous son, John, Jesus has given us 'salvation through

the forgiveness of [our] sins, because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death' (Luke 1:77-79). This is the big picture. This is the context. This is how the whole thing makes sense.



1

Made whole

A RESCUE EFFORT WAS CARRIED OUT in Chiang Rai Province, Thailand, between 24 June and 10 July 2018 which captured global attention. A staggering 10,000-plus people were involved by the end, including 100 divers, 900 police officers, 2,000 soldiers and representatives from around 100 governmental agencies. Helicopters, ambulances, diving cylinders and pumps to clear more than a billion litres of water from the caves. Many of the rescuers risked their lives, and one, Saman Kunan, died delivering supplies of air. The cost was astronomical, but everyone agreed it was worth it.

What could be worth such costly efforts to save? What deserved rescuing from four kilometres into submerged caves? When I was a child, I had a beloved toy, Norway Doll. At three years old, I would have argued she was worth any effort to retrieve, but the truth is she wasn't. How about an enormously valuable piece of jewellery? Imagine losing the Pink Star Diamond, worth \$72 million. You'd want it back for sure, but you'd find it hard to convince anyone to sacrifice their life for it. What about a trapped fox? Or a much-loved dog? They are living beings at least. The harsh reality is that they wouldn't warrant a rescue effort on anything close to the scale I've described either. Trapped in the Tham Luang Nang Non cave were twelve boys and their football coach. Thirteen human lives. That makes sense of all the effort, and amazingly they all made it out alive.

The Christmas story is a pivotal point in the greatest rescue mission ever conceived. As Charles Wesley's carol 'Hark the Herald Angels Sing' puts it:

*Mild he lays his glory by
Born that man no more may die
Born to raise the sons of earth
Born to give them second birth.*

Jesus was born into danger, hardship and hostility. He lived a life poured out for others and ultimately went willingly to a brutal death, nailed to a cross where he took on the sins of the world. His rescue effort was not understood, sought or even accepted by most, so why did he do it? None of this makes the slightest bit of sense if the object of the rescue wasn't valuable. And so we start our approach to Christmas here, with what is good in creation and with what is precious to God.



1 December

Made good

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters...

And God said, 'Let the water under the sky be gathered to one place, and let dry ground appear.' And it was so. God called the dry ground 'land', and the gathered waters he called 'seas'. And God saw that it was good.

Then God said, 'Let the land produce vegetation: seed-bearing plants and trees on the land that bear fruit with seed in it, according to their various kinds.' And it was so. The land produced vegetation: plants bearing seed according to their kinds and trees bearing fruit with seed in it according to their kinds. And God saw that it was good.

GENESIS 1:1-2, 9-12

How do you remind yourself of important things? I write myself endless notes, send myself texts, get email alerts from my calendar and rely on people with better memories than mine. And I still find my mind unable to file things where I can find them when I need them. At this time of year, things are particularly bad – Christmas parties where even the host's name is lost to me; finding I can't locate that thing (what's it called?) that holds up the Christmas tree; failing to put in the online food order before all the slots are taken; and sending the kids to school in Christmas jumpers on the wrong day. My grandpa used to tie knots in his handkerchief as an aide-memoire. I don't know how he always remembered to put a clean handkerchief in his pocket.

Forgetfulness is not a quirky characteristic of mine – I share it with the rest of the human race. We are by nature forgetful, which is one of the reasons why we have times in the year set aside to remind us of important parts of our story as God’s people. Christmas is there for us to remember the birth of Jesus, Easter his death and resurrection, Pentecost the coming of the Holy Spirit and so on. We don’t, however, have a built-in way of reminding ourselves, individually and communally, that God made the world and that he made it good. This means we can forget where the story began. And, as you will know if you’ve ever been late to the theatre and only watched what happened after the interval, if you miss the beginning of the story, you won’t fully grasp the significance of its climax and conclusion.

The very beginning of the Christmas story is the beginning of the universe. The Genesis account of creation tells us two things that give crucial context to the part of the plot where God is born a human. First, it tells us God made the world. And second, it tells us the world was made good. Let’s consider how these things shed light on the drama in the stable.

Humanist Manifestos I and II state: ‘Religious humanists regard the universe as self-existing and not created... we begin with humans not God.’ Christians begin with a creator God. It is right there in the opening sentence of the Bible: ‘In the beginning, God created.’ All physical matter was spoken into being – conceived of, crafted and delivered – by the one being who has no beginning and no end. This is God’s show, his stage, his theatre, his everything. Before him: nothing. Without him: nothing. There is a profound connection between creator and created, as artists, parents, builders and inventors all know. If you want to test this premise, see what happens if you tell a chef their food was disgusting. I’d advise you to wear protective clothing for this experiment.

But we are not talking about a plate of coq au vin here; we are talking about the sum total of all matter in the universe. Its maker loves it with a boundless, eternal passion. Why would God stoop to enter the

constraints of humanity? Why would he do this with the purpose of submitting to execution? Because he is the maker of this universe, and he was never going to walk away from it.

So God made the world, and when he made it, it was perfect: ordered, harmonious and beautiful. There were boundaries between water and dry ground, night and day. Species were differentiated and behaved according to their design. From formless, empty darkness came a cosmos of infinite complexity, perfectly balanced. He looked at it all and pronounced it good.

Why is it important that we don't omit the part of the story where everything was as it should be? Why does this belong in the same picture as the Christ born into a society where the ruler could issue a command to kill all the baby boys in the area and it would be carried out? Where the few who even claimed to worship God were at odds with each other and more interested in looking good than in what went on in their hearts? Where some were hungry and others over-stuffed? It is important because it sets us off on the right trajectory. The narrative arc is towards redemption and restoration. What was made was so good it was worth saving. Yes, there had been a lot that had gone wrong. Yes, Jesus came because there was a huge mess to clean up. But under the mess, oh what staggering goodness, glory and grace! Jesus was born to carry out a rescue mission because the cosmos was worth rescuing.

For reflection

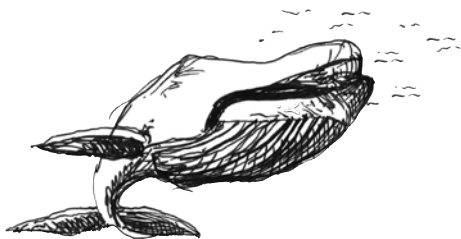
You are worthy, our Lord and God,
to receive glory and honour and power,
for you created all things,
and by your will they were created
and have their being.

REVELATION 4:11

God willed all things into being. Let your imagination travel around the places you love and know that God shares your delight in them.

Prayer

*God of creation, thank you for this beautiful world you made.
Thank you that you are invested in it and that you love it.
You are worthy of all glory, honour and power. Amen*





Enabling all ages to grow in faith



Anna Chaplaincy
Living Faith
Messy Church
Parenting for Faith

The Bible Reading Fellowship (BRF) is a Christian charity that resources individuals and churches. Our vision is to enable people of all ages to grow in faith and understanding of the Bible and to see more people equipped to exercise their gifts in leadership and ministry.

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Advent is a time to remember and reflect on the Christmas story and the baby at its heart. But the virgin birth, the manger, the mysterious eastern visitors and their portentous gifts – all these hint at a much grander narrative. Come and explore the whole Christmas story, and find your place within it.

You've got an Advent treat in store with The Whole Christmas Story! I was educated, encouraged, challenged and moved. Our journey to Bethlehem begins in Eden, not Nazareth, and ends in a garden city, not Egypt. Jo Swinney reminds us that the Christmas story is part of God's bigger story, and it's one into which we are invited to play our part. It's a whole story for the whole of life. I can't think of a better way to prepare for Christmas.

Paul Woolley, chief executive, LICC



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